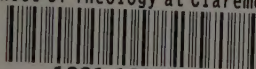


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Back to God







"I will arise, and will go to my Father, and say to Him: Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee."—*Luke, 15, 18.*

BACK TO GOD

A TREATISE ON CONFESSION,
OR THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

By
2265
MG

By

REV. FULGENCE MEYER, O.F.M.

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Missionary and Author of

"Uni Una," "Plain Talks on Marriage,"

"Youth's Pathfinder," Etc.



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To Jesus,
the Savior of Sinners, and to
Mary, the Refuge of Sinners,
this book is lovingly and grate-
fully dedicated, on behalf of
himself and fellow-sinners, by
The Author

Foreword

WITH added explanations and illustrations, the author's mission and retreat instructions on Confession, or the Sacrament of Penance, are contained in this book. May it receive the same ready and generous welcome accorded its predecessors.

The author uses this occasion to confess his indebtedness to the two censors of this book, viz., Fr. Hugh Staud, O.F.M., and Fr. Valentine Schaaf, O.F.M. The former has been the appointed censor for every one of the author's books; the latter for his last three books. Both have been very helpful by offering timely corrections and making valuable suggestions, for which the author expresses his sincere appreciation.

THE AUTHOR.

On the feast of Our Lord's Resurrection,
the anniversary of the institution of
holy penance, April 8, 1928.

CHAPTER I

The Institution of Holy Penance

PART ONE

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, do I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be afraid” (John, 14, 27).

WHOEVER suffers shipwreck on the high seas eagerly welcomes and thankfully grips the solitary plank of rescue that comes to view in his distress, and is within easy reach.

From the beginning of Christianity the Holy Fathers have called confession, or the sacrament of penance, the one and only plank of salvation for those who have suffered spiritual shipwreck by committing a mortal sin after baptism. “Penance,” they said, “is a second baptism.”

To instruct its readers, whether they are spiritually shipwrecked or not—for the sacrament of penance not only saves the soul after, but also guards it against, shipwreck—how to evaluate sufficiently, and use efficiently, this priceless plank or life-boat of eternal salvation, is the purpose of this book.

Non-Catholics and Confession

There are many good and sincere non-Catholics who say: "If it were not for confession, I would become a Catholic at once; but confession is one thing to which I can not be reconciled."

One can make allowance for such an utterance on their part, as they have never been instructed regarding the value and excellence of the holy sacrament of penance, and have never experienced the sweetness of its effects upon the soul. With reference to their attitude towards confession the prayer is in order: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke, 23, 34). Experience proves, however, that these very non-Catholics, once they override, with the help of God's grace, this prejudice against confession, and embrace the Catholic faith wholeheartedly, often find nothing that gives them more consolation, peace, and joy, and nothing that for them is easier and sweeter to practice, than confession. It is God's reward for their faith and trust in Him. And they say gratefully as the blind man, after Jesus cured him: "One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see" (John, 9, 25).

Catholics and Confession

But there are also a number of Catholics, still practicing and clinging to their faith, who say: "The only thing I dislike in the Catholic religion is confession. How happy I should be, if it were

abolished!" When Catholics speak thus, they manifest either ignorance or ingratitude, or both. And at times they thereby reveal, that their private life is not what it ought to be. Here, of course, are not included the poor victims of scrupulosity, whose aversion for confession is morbid, and often not a fault of theirs.

The Catholic who has a clear and thorough knowledge of the sacrament of penance, and is in earnest about enjoying its marvelous benefits, rather says gratefully and glowingly: "If in my holy religion there is one thing that for me, a poor sinner, is full of solace, comfort, peace, joy, and strength, it is confession. To me it is, in a way, the most soothing and heartening and hence the most welcome of God's gifts. I love it, and I would be miserable without it. Weak and frail as I am, and sinning day by day, what should I do but despair, if Jesus had not made provision in His infinite mercy to tell me again and again, through His delegate, after I have made an humble and contrite confession: 'Be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven thee?'" (Matt., 9, 2.)

"My Yoke Is Sweet, and My Burden Light"

Without excepting a single item of it, our Blessed Savior has declared regarding the religion He preached: "My yoke is sweet, and My burden light" (Matt., 11, 30). It is easy to show that these divine words bear especially on confession;

and that, consequently, far from being the hardest part of Catholic practice, as many say or feel it is, confession is the easiest; instead of being the bitterest, it is the sweetest; in place of being the most trying, it is the most soothing; rather than the most repulsive, it is the most inviting.

To prove this it is not at all necessary to do violence to any article of our holy faith. All that is required is to understand the words and conduct of our divine Redeemer in their true light. In instituting the sacrament of penance, or confession, as it is commonly called, Jesus had nothing else in view than the fulfilment of His gracious promise: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, do I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be afraid" (John, 14, 27).

It will help us to a right understanding of the institution of confession if we have in mind, from the beginning to the end of this treatise, the significant words of the Bible: "The Lord is sweet to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps. 144, 9). We know that all the attributes or perfections of God are infinite. There is no gradation or difference of degree among them. But in their manifestation on earth there is a great and marked distinction, and in this sense "His tender mercies are over all His works".

God's Ruling Urge

In this life God exhibits none of His qualities with such frequency and profuseness as His mercy. He is extremely partial to its application and display on all occasions. To speak after a human fashion, but with all reverence, it is God's ruling urge and His predominant tendency to show mercy. He can not help Himself. As soon as any occasion presents itself, and there is the slightest room or call for it, He tenders His mercy with lavish and unrestrained generosity.

Nowhere is this conduct of God more prevalent and more apparent than in the sacrament of penance, which is the main channel of His mercy. Particularly in regard to it, Jesus says: "They that are whole, need not the physician: but they that are sick. I came not to call the just, but sinners to penance" (Luke, 5, 31, 32).

It was with an eye to the sacrament of penance especially that Jesus told the consoling parables of the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Groat, all of which are paeans of triumph and hymns of rejoicing in honor of God's mercy as being, in its actual demonstration in this life, far above His justice and all His works. The sacrament of penance is so to speak the riot of God's mercy. In it the mercy of God knows neither measure nor bounds.

The Institution of Holy Penance

The entire manner of the institution of holy penance, and all the circumstances of time, place and persons surrounding it, as well as the words used at it, evidently intimate and conclusively prove, that confession was to be nothing else than an inexhaustible source of mercy and an unfailling spring of peace to the penitent sinner.

On what day did our Lord choose to institute this bounteous sacrament? On the day of His resurrection. He selected this day on purpose. Its choice is most significant. On a glad and happy day, on a day of mighty victory and far-reaching conquest, kings, emperors, and potentates of all nations and times have always made it a custom to display their happiness and joy by proclaiming an amnesty, or a general deliverance and the entire freedom of all the captives and prisoners, even of such as were sentenced to life imprisonment, or condemned to death. In addition to this they conferred great privileges and precious favors upon all citizens. The fortunate event gave them an impulse of generosity and magnanimity which they could not resist. They wanted to have everyone in their kingdom without exception partake of their gladness and rejoice with them in their triumph. On such a day it was farthest from their thoughts to inflict pain or punishment on any of their subjects for whatsoever reason. It would have been completely

out of harmony with their sentiments and the spirit of the day they were celebrating.

**“This Is the Day Which the Lord Hath Made:
Let Us Be Glad and Rejoice Therein”**

Through His resurrection from the dead by His own power, Jesus achieved the greatest victory and the grandest triumph ever recorded or to be recorded in the past, present and future history of mankind. He completely and forever conquered the conqueror that conquered and conquers every other conqueror of the human race: death itself. From the grave of death He rose to a new life of immortal glory and imperishable power. On the day, then, of this most glorious victory our Lord, the King of kings, was in a mood of ineffable goodness, boundless liberality and limitless benevolence. He wanted to make all His disciples share in His conquest and joy. Being not only human but also divine, He was able to render their sharing in it substantial and lasting. He was in no mood at all to inflict pain upon anyone, not even the enemies that caused His death, let alone upon any of His followers. He wanted these to conquer as He conquered, to rejoice as He was rejoicing, to become free and to be glorious, happy and immortal even like Himself.

For this reason on Resurrection Day Jesus instituted the holy sacrament of penance. It was to be the compendium of all the love, goodness,

mercy and joy with which His divine Heart overflowed on that day, and which He was eager to communicate to His disciples then and forever. From this fact alone it is plain, that it was farthest removed from the intentions of our Lord to have confession serve as a tax upon His subjects, as an ordeal, a torture, or a penalty. Nothing could be more incongruous than the imputation of such a plan to our Savior on the day of His resurrection.

A General Amnesty

No, Jesus wanted holy penance to be a general amnesty and a complete and final deliverance from their bonds to all contrite sinners. Even as He had risen from the dead, so He gave them the power to rise from sin, the death of the soul; and as He had torn asunder once for all the fetters of death, so He enabled them to break forever the chains of sin. As His joy was never to be troubled again by another death, so He empowered them through penance to maintain a continuous joy and peace of mind, without any fear of their forgiven sins ever harassing them again. Confession was to be to His followers a permanent balm to the soul, a refreshment to the heart, a relief to the conscience, a joy to the mind, and an abiding font of heavenly peace.

This is incontestably evidenced by the words Jesus used at the institution. The Bible records it as follows: "Now when it was late that same

day, the first of the week, and the doors were shut, where the disciples were gathered together for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them: Peace be to you. And when He had said this, He showed them His hands, and His side. The disciples therefore were glad, when they saw the Lord. He said therefore to them again: Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent Me I also send you. When He had said this, He breathed on them; and He said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John, 20, 19-23).

"The End of a Perfect Day"

"Very early in the morning" (Mark, 16, 2), Jesus, rising from the grave, conquered the death of the body. "When it was late that same day" (John, 20, 19), He gave His disciples the power to rise from sin and conquer the death of the soul. It was in truth the "end of a perfect day".

It is above all noticeable that our Lord began the bestowal of the power of forgiving sins by the solemn communication of peace. Not only once, but twice He said emphatically: "Peace be to you!" There was design in this introduction. It was purposed to bring out in unmistakable relief the fact, that the one aim of confession was the imparting of peace. Hence they, who from the sacrament of penance derive nothing but worry,

trouble, uneasiness and perturbation of mind, do not look upon it as Jesus intended they should. They have an altogether wrong idea of it. If the reception of the sacrament does not bring peace to the heart and rest to the mind it does not function as our Lord wanted it to function; and the cause of this lies not in the sacrament, but in the recipient, as I shall explain by and by.

A Mission of Mercy

"As the Father hath sent Me, so I send you." These words, too, accentuate the quality of divine mercy as being the predominant note of the sacrament of penance. Jesus said again and again that He was sent to gather the lost sheep and to free sinners from their spiritual bondage. Through the prophet Isaias He defines His mission saying: "The spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because the Lord hath anointed Me: He hath sent Me to preach to the meek, to heal the contrite of heart, and to preach a release to the captives, and deliverance to them that are shut up; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and . . . to comfort all that mourn" (Isai., 61, 1, 2).

The apostles, then, and their successors, in hearing confessions are to be in a particular manner the representatives of Christ as the Good Shepherd Who, when He finds the sheep that was lost, is not hard, cold, harsh, and severe towards it, but mild, warm, gentle and merciful; they are to

represent Him as the Father of the Prodigal Son, Who, when the errant boy returns home a penitent, does not sternly scold or punish him, but lovingly embraces and welcomes him home. "As the Father hath sent Me, so I send you."

The Tribunal of Mercy

Through the prophet Isaias God also says of Christ, and of the priest who in the confessional takes the place and acts in the Name of Christ: "Behold My servant, I will uphold Him: My elect, my soul delighteth in Him: I have given My spirit upon Him. He shall not cry, nor have respect to person, neither shall His voice be heard abroad. The bruised reed He shall not break, and smoking flax He shall not quench . . . He shall not be sad nor troublesome" (Isai., 42, 1-5). No matter how bruised in spirit the penitent may be in entering the confessional, the priest will not break but restore him to strength through kindly consideration and tender sympathy; and however little smoke of the erstwhile flame of the love of God may be left in the penitent's soul, the priest will not quench it, but by his ardent love of God and Christlike zeal for the sinner's salvation he will fan it unto a new and burning fire.

No "Respect to Person"

The priest, in dealing with the penitents, shall have no "respect to person", but in the adminis-

tration of God's mercy he will treat all alike, be they rich or poor, distinguished or obscure. "He shall not cry, neither shall his voice be heard abroad," for he will deal with the sinner in respectful and considerate privacy, and feel bound by the most sacred bonds of religion to the utmost and absolutely inviolable secrecy regarding what is told him in the confessional. "He shall not be sad nor troublesome," since he will not meddle unnecessarily with the sinner's personal affairs: on the contrary he will be glad and rejoice heartily with the sinner because of the generous pardon extended him by God through his ministry.

Some Confessors Are Brusque

Maybe one or the other of my readers is here inclined to object, that in the confessional not all the priests are quite so Christlike in their manner; that some of them are rather brusque and unsympathetic, at least in appearance. Possibly; human nature can strive after the ideal, but it never attains it; at times it falls quite short of it with the best intentions in the world. Hence some priests, owing oftener than not to some irritating trait of the penitent, may here and there lose control of their nerves and their patience in the confessional. But usually their apparent coldness and harshness are but mercy and goodness in disguise. The penitent, in their opinion, needs just such treatment for his or her correction and

improvement. Open gentleness and sympathy would do him or her more harm than good, and would act as poison rather than medicine. This is almost in every case the explanation of a confessor's seeming peevishness, abruptness, hardness, and severity.

The Breath of God

After saying the aforesaid words, Jesus breathed on everyone of the apostles. This was a most unusual ceremony, and therefore conveyed a deep and consequential meaning. Once before God had breathed on His creature. It was in paradise when, after He had formed the body of Adam of the clay of the earth, He breathed an immortal soul into it. In other words, the breath of the Almighty produced in man something that resembled God Himself, that was an image and likeness of His own substance, and that was to endure forever. Such was the effect of the breathing of God.

Now again God breathes and His breath is to produce another divine effect. By His breath, Jesus imparts to the apostles and their successors His very Spirit; and with His Spirit He communicates His own power, a power that the infinite God alone possesses, the power to forgive sins.

"Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (Luke, 5, 21), said the Jews chidingly to Jesus one day. Our Lord admitted their contention, but this

power which He had as God, He delegated to His apostles as He breathed upon them on the day of His resurrection.

The Holy Ghost Starts Down the Ages

After breathing upon His disciples Jesus said solemnly: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." Since our Lord instituted the means of salvation for all people and all times, the Holy Ghost Whom He imparted to the apostles on resurrection day was to be transmitted down the ages by His disciples to His future disciples in unbroken succession unto the end of time, in keeping with His words: "Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Matt., 28, 20). And this transmission of the Holy Ghost was to be made in a signal manner through the sacrament of penance.

Whenever you go to confession worthily, therefore, you receive the Holy Ghost in the form of either a renewal or an increase of His presence in your soul. Have you ever noticed as you went to confession that the priest, whilst he was giving you the absolution, or forgiveness of sins, held his hand aloft over you? Why this solemn ceremony in the seclusion and secrecy of the confessional? It is indicative of the bestowal of the Holy Ghost. When the bishop imparts the Holy Ghost to the

candidate for Holy Orders at the conferment of the priesthood, he does it by placing his hands on the head of the candidate and then holding his right hand over him while he invokes the Holy Ghost upon him. And all the assisting priests perform the same ceremony regarding the candidate.

The Mystic Gift

When the priest, then, holds his hand over you, as he is about to speak the words of absolution, he thereby manifests that he is on the point of infusing into your soul the same Holy Ghost Whom he received from the bishop at his priestly ordination, and Who has come down to him and to you in uninterrupted consignment through the centuries from Jesus Christ Who, on the very day on which He rose from the dead, started the Holy Spirit on His way of salvation and sanctification. And even as in paradise, the spirit of God breathing upon the body of clay produced life where there was none, and created a perfect image and resemblance of Himself in a mass of earth that seemed least of all adapted to receive such a gift: so many a soul, that enters the confessional spiritually dead and lifeless, leaves it with the breath of God upon it in the form of the Holy Ghost, restoring the supernatural image of God in all its completeness and beauty. Such is the

power of the sacrament of penance, instituted by the author of life on the day on which He conquered death.

The Pass to Paradise

And this boon of restoration to spiritual life through confession was extended by our Lord to every sinner without exception, regardless of the number and nature of his sins, provided he would be sorry for them and minded never to sin again. Jesus indicated this by the words: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven." He made no restriction and no reservation, neither of persons nor of sins. For all contrite sinners, therefore, whatever might be the nature, number and manner of their sins, and the frequency of their relapses into sin, the confessional was to be a source of abiding hope and heartening comfort. In his immortal poem, the *Inferno*, Dante places on the portals of hell the terrible inscription: "Abandon every hope, all ye who enter here." On every confessional is appropriate the inscription: "Resume all hope of spiritual life and salvation, all ye who enter here." The mere well-intentioned entrance into the confessional is an earnest of eternal life, for the confessional is the straight and narrow pass to paradise: to the paradise of interior peace and joy on earth, and to the paradise of untasted and unfancied delights in the presence of God in heaven.

Mane, Thecel, Phares

When Baltassar, the impious king of the Chaldeans, had a sacrilegious banquet in Babylon, "in the same hour there appeared fingers, as it were of the hand of a man writing . . . upon the surface of the wall: and the king beheld the joints of the hand that wrote. Then was the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him: and the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees struck one against the other" (Dan., 5, 6). The words written by the mysterious hand were Mane, Thecel, Phares. According to the prophet Daniel, who interpreted them for the king, they meant the king's insufficiency before the Lord, and his consequent impending destruction. And "the same night Baltassar the Chaldean was slain" (ib., 30).

Before the sinner deplores his sins and enters the confessional he sees against himself, as it were, the ghastly handwriting of God, declaring in his regard also: "Mane, Thecel, Phares," and threatening him with everlasting perdition. If he catches the drift of this terrible menace, his countenance, too, ought to change, and his thoughts ought to trouble him; the joints of his loins should be loosed, and his knees strike one against the other for sheer fear and trepidation of spirit. But no sooner he repents and humbly confesses his sins the ill-boding handwriting against him vanishes, and instead of Mane,

Thecel, Phares, he will see in his behalf the consoling words of God: Forgiven, Forgotten, Restored, meaning: "All your sins are forgiven and forgotten by the Lord. God's love and friendship, the inheritance of heaven, and all your previous merits are fully restored to you." Far from being "slain the same night", as was Baltassar, the sinner receives the fullness of life the same day, yea, the same moment. "We should make merry and be glad; for this, thy brother, was dead, and is come to life again: he was lost, and is found" (Luke, 15, 32).

No matter how dead the sinner was before his confession, after it he is come to the fullness of life again; and however lost he was, he is now back in God's arms once more. When the body of Christ was laid in the grave, it was beaten, battered and bruised beyond appearing like a human body at all: at the resurrection it was prettier and grander than ever before. Similarly, let a sinner's soul be torn, rent and sullied by sin beyond cognizance as a one-time child of God: through the sacrament of penance it is made more beauteous and godlike than ever.

As Christ crucified in general, so the sacrament of penance in particular is "unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness: but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks," it is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor., 1, 23, 24), and above all, the **MERCY** of God.

CHAPTER II

The Institution of Holy Penance

PART TWO

"Peace be to you . . . Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them" (John, 20, 19, 23).

WHY did our Lord wait until the evening of Resurrection Day to institute holy penance? It was to be the climax of all his loving and wonderful apparitions on that day. He began the day by appearing to Mary, His Blessed Mother, the paragon of innocence, to bless and reward her for her sinlessness. He ended it by arranging an absolute pardon for all penitent sinners in order to bless and reward them for their penitence. In the evening somehow the heart has a tendency to grow more sociable, sympathetic, loving, and generous. Our Lord yielded to this tendency by instituting the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of Love, late at night. He followed the same psychological inclination when He instituted holy penance "when it was late that same day" (John, 20, 19). Our Savior could not restrain or moder-

ate His love. Overcome by His impulse of generosity, He opened all the floodgates of His mercy, regardless of any claims of His justice, and said unreservedly: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them."

"The Doors Were Shut"

When Jesus instituted holy penance "the doors were shut". In this circumstance we note a silent but significant reference to the sacred privacy of the confessional as it is in use throughout the world today. The confessional as it is now employed was not customary in ancient times, but the privacy of confession began with the very institution of the sacrament of penance. Penance is in a way the anticipation or the prevention of the private or particular judgment of God, according to St. Paul who says: "If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged" (1 Cor., 11, 31). In the particular judgment there will be only two: God and the soul. In penance there are only two: God's delegate and the sinner.

The entire sacramental ceremony is performed in quiet seclusion and sacred stillness. The penitent softly whispers his sins, and the priest gently whispers the words of absolution. The greatest works of God were done in noiseless seclusion. Jesus was conceived and became man in the quiet sanctuary of Nazareth unknown to the world.

He was born in Bethlehem in the stillness of the night. On Mt. Calvary He created an unusual night, as it were, in order to die in it. And He arose from the dead in the quietude preceding the dawn. In a similar manner He has souls to rise to a new spiritual life in the dusk and solemn silence of the confessional. Even as the world was not at all aware of the incarnation in Nazareth, the nativity in Bethlehem, and the resurrection in Jerusalem, so it is unaware of the great wonders taking place in the confessional.

“A Whistling of a Gentle Air”

The hallowed whisper of the confessional assumes a deep meaning in the light of the episode in the life of the prophet Elias, related in the Bible (3 Kings, 19, 11 sqq.), as follows: “And He said to him: Go forth, and stand upon the mount, before the Lord: and behold, the Lord passeth; and a great and strong wind before the Lord overthrowing the mountains, and breaking the rocks to pieces: the Lord is not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake: the Lord is not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire: the Lord is not in the fire. And after the fire *a whistling of a gentle air*: and when Elias heard it, he covered his face with his mantle . . . and behold a voice unto him.” It was the voice of God. Similarly when the priest in the confessional whispers the words of absolution, his whisper is as

the voice of God, and in hearing it the penitent may well cover his face with his hands for reverence, awe, and joyful thanksgiving.

Two Kinds of Speak-Easies

Since the introduction of legal prohibition of spirituous liquors in our country so-called "speak-easies" have increased rapidly. They aim to be evasions of the law. They make neither for the virtue nor for the welfare of their frequenters in any way. Whoever patronizes them loses his money and often, too, his reputation, his domestic peace, his health of body and soul, and not seldom his very life.

In a spiritual way the confessional is the "speak-easy" in which the sinner, legitimately however, evades the very wrath and vengeance of God. Instead of losing, he recovers in it the best things there are: the grace of God, the title to heaven, his peace of mind and, incidentally, the peace with his fellow-men, his good reputation, the heavenly merits he lost through sin: in a word, the supernatural life and health of his soul.

When God Speaks

The words of sacramental absolution are few and short. The priest says: "I absolve you from your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." These few words, however, convey a divine power. They

create a new supernatural life in the soul. It is God's way to express works of infinite value in a few brief words, for instance: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" (Gen., 1, 1); "God said: Be light made. And light was made" (ib., 3); "The Word was made Flesh" (John, 1, 14). In like manner the words "I absolve you from your sins", spoken by a priest over a soul, mean to this soul all the difference there is between eternal life and eternal death; between the possession and the loss of God; between endless bliss and unending woe; between being a citizen of heaven and being an inmate of hell forever. They are quickly spoken, and hardly heard or understood by the penitent himself, but their salutary effect is realized at once and reaches out into all eternity. Verily the "whistling of a gentle air" is the voice of the all-merciful God.

The prophet Daniel relates of himself, saying: "Now while I was . . . confessing my sins . . . Gabriel . . . spoke to me, and said: O Daniel, I am now come forth to teach thee, and that thou mightest understand" (Dan., 9, 20). When you confess your sins, the same God Who spoke to Daniel through His messenger Gabriel speaks to you through His delegate, the priest. As He instructed and assured Daniel, after he confessed his sins, regarding the redemption of mankind, so God instructs and assures you, when you confess

your sins, regarding your own personal redemption. It is, indeed, a most solemn moment, and rich with eternal consequences.

The Price Jesus Paid

Why did Jesus show His disciples His hands and His side as He was about to institute the sacrament of penance? To bring home to all the beneficiaries of the sacrament the great price He paid for its dispensation, and to make them prize and love it more in consequence. To endow His Church with the power of forgiving sins our Savior had to shed all His Blood and die the most agonizing death on the Cross. To remind His followers of this tremendous price He exhibited His hands and His side at the institution of penance. And if there had been but one confession to be heard throughout the ages, and a single mortal sin to be forgiven, to render this possible our Lord would have shed the same amount of Blood and died the same horrid death.

We easily lose sight of this enormous price Jesus paid for the forgiveness of our sins. Just as we are prone to exaggerate in our minds the sacrifice of our pride we are asked to make in the confessional, so prone we are to minimize or to ignore the tremendous sacrifice Jesus made of His Blood and His life to procure for us the pardon for our sins. No ordeal of confession can in bitterness compare with the ordeal of Jesus' death. The love

of us sweetened this for Him. Why, then, should not the love of Him sweeten the bitterest confession for us?

When you kneel at the confessional and see a penitent going in and, after a minute or two, coming out again, you make little of it. Yet in this short space of time that person received all the propitiating power of the Precious Blood of Christ upon his soul. If Catholics always bore this sufficiently in mind, far from shrinking from the confessional through a false shame, pride or fear, they would frequent it with gratitude, joy, and avidity of spirit. The mere fact that Jesus paid so much to make the forgiveness of sin available would convince them that it must be a wondrous and most desirable spiritual boon.

The Place of the Institution

What enhances this idea of confession is the reflection upon the place in which Jesus instituted holy penance. It was nothing less than the cenacle in which three days previously He had instituted the Most Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of His Love. With design He chose to institute penance in the same sacred place, for penance no less than the Eucharist, although in a different way, was to be a perpetual memorial of His love for men; or, to speak more exactly, if the Eucharist was to be the compendium of Jesus' infinite love, penance was to be the compendium of His

boundless mercy. If His love for us reached its zenith in the Most Holy Eucharist, His mercy reached its climax in holy penance.

The choice of the same place for the institution of these two great sacraments also intimated that there was to be a close relation between them. Some Catholics err in assuming that their confession is only valid when it is followed by holy Communion. This is a mistake, since there is no such necessary connection between the two sacraments. Confession is a complete sacrament of itself, and is valid or invalid on its own merits in a particular case, whether holy Communion follows immediately upon it or not.

“Let a Man Prove Himself”

Yet there is this relation between the two sacraments, that penance often serves as a preparation for Communion. St. Paul indicates this in the words: “Let a man prove himself: and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of the chalice. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, not discerning the Body of the Lord” (1 Cor., 11, 28). This proving of oneself before approaching the holy table is usually done through confession. And if an humble and contrite confession is the best preparation for a worthy Communion, the worthy and frequent reception of holy Communion can not fail to help and dispose one mightily

towards a more profitable reception of holy penance.

Sensible people go to their dentists not only after their teeth are decayed, but they go periodically to have their teeth cleansed and protected against decay. In the same way pious Christians do not wait until their souls are rotten with sin. They prefer to have them attended to before they are in a bad way, and safeguarded against the attacks of sin. In China, they say, it is customary to pay the physician if he keeps his client in good health. In case the client takes sick, the doctor receives no pay for his treatments. Whatever view one may take of this custom, it is as true of the soul as it is of the body, that prevention is better than cure. Convinced as they are of this, virtuous Catholics frequent the confessional more for prevention than for a cure of serious sin.

He Was Always Fighting

The famous French Jesuit, Father Ravignan, was asked by a friend what he did in his novitiate. He replied half earnestly, half playfully: "I was fighting all the time. There were two of us in the same convent cell struggling for the mastery: Ravignan, the sinner, and Ravignan, the convert. They could not get along with one another at all; nor would they compromise. So Ravignan, the convert, was all the time engaged in pitching Ravignan, the sinner, out of the window."

Everyone who aims to please God and go to heaven experiences the same battle within himself. The great St. Paul was not immune from it. He says in his letter to the Romans: "I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members. Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God, by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom., 7, 23-25). The only way our better selves can conquer in this fight against our lower nature is by having recourse to the grace of Jesus Christ, especially in the confessional, where it flows liberally, abundantly and at all times.

When Confession Is Necessary

If one is conscious of mortal sin he must go to confession before he receives holy Communion. An act of perfect contrition, which is known to take away every sin, is not a sufficient proving of self in this case, according to the express declaration of the Church. Only in a case of necessity, when one is morally forced to receive holy Communion, and there is no chance of going to confession, may one who is conscious of mortal sin approach the holy table after making an act of perfect contrition; with the proviso, however, that he will confess the sin when he has the opportunity.

But not only those who are aware that they are in mortal sin go to confession. Pious and God-loving people in general make it a habit to go to confession often and regularly, say every week or fortnight, not because they commit mortal sins, but in order to be delivered of their venial sins on the one hand, and to be armed against all future sins on the other.

To this rule there are exceptions. A number of people go daily to holy Communion, which is a most commendable practice. At the same time they go to confession but once or twice a year, which is not so laudable. While being insistent in the reception of one sacrament, they should not neglect the other. Theologically, of course, no objection can be raised against their method. As long as one does not commit a mortal sin he need not go to confession at all, but can keep on receiving holy Communion daily for ever so many years without confession.

A Rich Channel of Graces

Ascetically, however, such a practice is not the best. The worthy approach to the sacred tribunal of penance not only renders the reception of the holy Eucharist more productive of heavenly graces, but penance of itself is a rich channel of these very graces for the well disposed recipient. It may hardly be questioned, that in many instances an humble and contrite confession enriches

the soul more, in a given case, than the merely habitual and perfunctory reception of holy Communion. At any rate it will profit the most pious and devoted daily communicant a great deal if to his daily Communions he joins, if possible, a weekly humble confession.

We must not lose sight of the fact, that every sacrament confers a double grace. First, it infuses or increases sanctifying grace; second, it imparts a sacramental grace which is peculiar to this particular sacrament, and is in the same manner and degree not supplied by any other sacrament. Thus the sacramental grace of holy orders, for instance, helps those who are ordained priests to comply faithfully with the obligations of the sacred priesthood. No other sacrament confers this special grace.

Drunk Three Times

What, then, is the sacramental grace proper to holy penance? It gives the penitent special assistance in avoiding the repetition of the sins which are forgiven him through the sacrament and towards which he may experience a certain weakness and inclination. Say a man sincerely confesses and duly repents of having been drunk three times and committed adultery twice. When he receives the absolution of the priest his sins are taken away from him at once, and in place of them his soul receives the priceless treasure of

sanctifying grace. This is the first grace, the communication or, respectively, the increase of which is common to all the seven sacraments. In addition to sanctifying grace the aforesaid penitent receives the special sacramental grace, peculiar to penance, namely a particular help from on high that enables him successfully to avoid all sins, especially the sins of drunkenness and adultery to which he is personally prone. And this sacramental grace is imparted not only with reference to the avoidance of mortal sins, but also of venial sins. Hence it is wise for the most conscientious and virtuous persons to receive the sacrament of penance often and regularly; once a week, if reasonably convenient.

Every Day in Every Way I Am Growing Better and Better

Even apart from its supernatural influence on the soul, the practice of weekly confession, as a mere ascetical and spiritual exercise, contains a great stimulant towards perfection and holiness. Some years ago a French doctor toured our country and achieved considerable publicity by his slogan: "Every day in every way I am growing better and better." The repetition of it on the part of many no doubt exerted a wholesome influence upon their mind and, indirectly, upon their corporal well-being. The exercise was nothing new in the field of psychology and auto-

suggestion. The secret of it has been known and in some manner or other applied for many centuries; in fact since the beginning of mankind.

In the spiritual and religious life the same stimulating and invigorating exercise is performed in the reception of the sacrament of penance. The penitent can not qualify for the acceptance of absolution unless he previously very thoroughly drills himself in the hatred of sin and the purpose of amendment. To do this he convinces himself above all, that with the help of God's grace it will be comparatively easy for him to avoid sin in the future and to grow in goodness. This conviction alone, coupled as it is with a strong auto-suggestion, is a potent factor towards self-improvement. In a word, the penitent says within himself every time he goes to confession, with reference to his moral and religious life: "Every day in every way I am growing better and better." The oftener and more regularly he says this, with sincerity and fervor, of course, the sooner will he be bound to attain perfection.

If perfection is achieved by continual reformation, the confessional is plainly the most potent school of perfection. You fully extinguish a fire by keeping the water turned on it until the last glowing embers die away and grow cold. In like manner you can extinguish unholy passion best by throwing over it again and again the wet blanket of humble and tearful confession.

The Delicacy of Conscience

To this it may be added that no religious exercise, not even the daily reception of holy Communion, is so apt to preserve and enhance the delicacy of conscience, which is known to be a powerful mark of predestination to eternal life, as the regular access to the sacred tribunal. This is particularly verified in him who prepares for his weekly confession by a daily or, preferably, a semi-daily examination of conscience, the one being a particular, the other a general examination. It is of great help in this same sphere of religious conduct, too, if the penitent adheres as much as is reasonable and possible to one confessor and spiritual guide. Various reasons prove that this practice, when embraced and maintained with good motives, must accrue to the benefit of the penitent.

The Same Dentist

The very fact that human nature is prone to act similarly in other departments, in which it aims to succeed or to profit, is a prepossession in favor of the practice. People like to go regularly to the same physician for their bodily ills, to the same dentist for the care of their teeth, to the same lawyer for their legal work, to the same tailor for their clothes, and the same merchant for their merchandise. Regularity of patronage begets a mutual interest and confidence that can not

but be helpful in the despatch of the work or business in question. So it is but natural for one who is thoroughly interested in his soul's welfare to choose a spiritual physician and director in whom he has confidence, to entrust his spiritual cure and health entirely to him, and to adhere to him faithfully without distrust, misgiving, or hesitation.

Wholesome Human Respect

Besides the heavenly merit and reward the penitent will thus reap for his childlike docility and submissiveness, there will also be a human element that will operate towards his advantage. The confessor will get a better, closer and finer knowledge of the penitent's soul, of its functions and reactions in various conditions and under divers influences and, as a result, he will be more able to give him proper warning, advice and direction. And the very practice of confessing regularly and exclusively to the same priest will produce the factor of wholesome human respect and its power over the penitent. The inference is evident. Above all the penitent will be regular as to the frequency of his confessions. He will be eager to manifest a good will to his confessor, who evinces a personal interest in his penitent's advancement, by appearing unfailingly for confession at the stated periods. This alone will be a decided gain.

The Same Sins Over and Over

Moreover, the penitent will be abashed at being under the necessity of confessing the same sins over and over to the same priest, without any semblance of amelioration in his conduct. He will be desirous of showing some improvement to his confessor, and of proving to him that his penitent is turning his good advice and patient direction to a good account. This desire, which is perfectly honorable and laudable, will keep him from committing certain faults, and spur him on to the acquisition of the opposite virtues. If human respect operates viciously in many cases, why should it not be used to function virtuously in others? If the respect we owe to God is not sufficient to keep us from evil in a given instance, why should it be wrong to bolster it up with human respect of an honorable character? Isn't this frequently done, and with every approbation, with regard to parents and other superiors? Are they to be blamed who abstain from unvirtuous deeds in order not to displease or disappoint those for whom they entertain sentiments of esteem, gratitude, reverence and love?

It Were Wiser to Go to Another Priest

I know that sometimes, in rare cases, human respect in reference to a regular confessor induces an unfortunate penitent to approach him and to make an unworthy confession from mere shame,

when it would be wiser to go to another priest, say a complete stranger, and confess validly. But this abuse or incidental misconduct does not militate against an otherwise very salutary practice, which has been and is universally approved and followed by people who are athirst for progress in true virtue and genuine holiness.

In saying all this I am not implying by any means that they who go to any confessor who may be easiest of access for the time being, without any effort to be permanently attached to one confessor, are not pious and holy. There are other means of sanctification besides the one just mentioned, and they may be exploiting them to their profit. Hence, since there is no obligation whatever of adhering to one confessor, everyone may follow his or her bent in this matter without being subject to blame or correction on the part of anyone. Confession is a sacred personal matter of the penitent, in which no one else has any right to intrude unbidden by the penitent himself. Still, if the penitent changes confessors at every confession merely to disguise his continuous relapses into mortal sin, and to get off with more lenient treatment in consequence, he is but deceiving himself, and getting away from the very method which would prove to be his timely amendment and ultimate salvation. The best thing he could do would be to frequent the same

confessor all the time, and to subject himself in all self-humiliation to his guidance unconditionally and unreservedly.

The Scarlet Woman

A story, which brings in relief the great mercy of God and the wondrous efficacy of the Blood of Christ upon the soul of the true penitent in the sacrament of penance, will serve as a fit conclusion to this chapter. A woman who had led a life of horrid sin was urged by the grace of God to do penance and return to virtue and righteousness. She made up her mind to go to confession at once, whatever it might cost, and however it might pain her. As she had not been to confession for years, and had heaped crime upon crime, she felt she should write her sins carefully, in order to make a complete and thoroughly good confession. She got paper, pen and ink, and covered several sheets of foolscap with the lurid tale of her crimson life.

Entering the confessional, the penitent asked leave to read her sins. The priest said, if it would serve her, she was at liberty to do it. Her contrition was as deep as it was evident. As she read the shocking record of her life, the priest heard her tears of compunction trickling down upon the paper as she read on and on. Every now and then her voice choked in sorrow. The priest soothed her, saying that she should take her time and be fully at ease, as there was no hurry whatever.

When she was through she asked her confessor, if after such a life she could still hope to be pardoned by God. The priest assured her that God's mercy infinitely outruns every weakness and malice of man. In view of her great sorrow he gave her a light penance, imparted the absolution and dismissed her.

“Whiter Than Snow”

Returning to her place in the pew, she gave way to a burst of joy and gratitude for having been received once more by God as His child. After saying her penance she chanced to look at the paper on which she had written her sins. To her great surprise not a trace of the writing could be seen. Everything was erased. The paper was immaculate. This was marvelous. It indicated to the penitent how much God had forgiven her all her sins. They were gone as though they had never been.

When you go to confession such a miracle does not happen. But what the miracle symbolized will happen to you, too. If you make as good a confession as you can in your condition: as soon as the priest speaks over you the sacred words of absolution, whatever may be the number and the nature of your sins, they will all be forgiven at once and forever and, in the words of the penitent Psalmist, your soul “shall be made whiter than snow” (Ps. 50, 9).

CHAPTER III.

The Soul's Bethsaida

“Wash me yet more from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin . . . Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow” (Ps. 50, 4, 9).

HEALTH resorts and bathing places have at all times and in all countries been popular and much in demand. Their lure is as strong and as much responded to in our day as ever before in history. It is sufficient for a certain spring to get a reputation for great healing power in order to draw crowds of eager seekers of health from all parts of the world.

In the days of our Lord's sojourn upon this earth there was in Jerusalem a wonderful pool of healing water, the story of which is given us by St. John in these words: “Now there is at Jerusalem a pond, called Probatika, which in Hebrew is named Bethsaida, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick, of blind, of lame, of withered, waiting for the moving of the water. And an angel of the Lord descended at certain times into the pond; and the water was moved. And he that went down first into the pond, after the motion of the water, was made whole of whatsoever infirmity he lay under” (John, 5, 2-5).

The Mystic Pool

Our Savior designedly wrought a miracle at this pool to indicate that it was a type of the much more wondrous spiritual pool He was to institute for the relief of souls in the sacrament of penance. Between the two there are certain striking resemblances and also marked differences. They resemble each other in this that in neither we find any exclusion as to persons or afflictions. Anyone could be cured of whatsoever corporal illness in the pool of Bethsaida; and anyone can be healed of whatsoever spiritual disease in the pool of holy penance. The cure in both cases was or is miraculous and supernatural, produced by the almighty power of God. In both cases, too, the cure was or is genuine, thorough and real.

Several differences, however, must be registered between the two pools. The pool of Bethsaida operated only at certain times: whereas the pool of holy penance functions whenever it is resorted to. In the pool of Bethsaida, even when it was in curative action, only one was healed: while in the pool of penance there is no limit to the number of those who may be cured in unbroken succession. The sick at the pool of Bethsaida had to wait until the angel of God descended to move the water: whereas the sick of soul may move the cleansing water of holy penance whenever they choose. Many of the sick at the pool of Bethsaida waited for years and years to be healed by the troubled

water—the man whom Jesus cured had been ill thirty-eight years—: while the pool of holy penance is always and immediately available and instantaneously heals everyone who approaches it in sincerity and sorrow.

Another great difference between the two pools is observable in this, that those who were cured of a bodily ailment rejoiced more demonstratively and created more public notice than do those who are healed of a spiritual distemper. Constituted as we are of body and soul, we are likely to be more partial to corporal than to spiritual favors, to crave them with more avidity, and to welcome them with more satisfaction. But this is not a true and just evaluation.

Soul Versus Body

The cure of the soul is immensely more beneficial and precious than the cure of the body. Our Lord brought this home to us in an unmistakable manner when he cured the man sick of the palsy. Jesus began by saying: "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee" (Mark, 2, 5). The man was brought to Jesus in view of his corporal cure. But Jesus knew that he stood much more in need of a spiritual cure, and that it would benefit him incomparably more. He started, therefore, by forgiving the man his sins. The corporal cure was secondary and negligible in comparison. It was performed merely to confirm the reality and bring in relief the importance of the spiritual cure.

Jesus at the same time emphasized the truth, that to forgive sins was just as hard or required just as much power, as to banish the palsy. He said to the Pharisees who judged Him to be blaspheming by presuming to forgive sins: "Which is easier, to say to the sick of the palsy: Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say: Arise, take up thy bed, and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (He saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say to thee: Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thy house. And immediately he arose; and taking up his bed, went his way in the sight of all; so that all wondered and glorified God, saying: We never saw the like" (ib., 9, sqq.).

Spiritual and Corporal Vision

The people did not wonder and glorify God when Jesus forgave the man his sins, although there was really much more reason for it then. On the contrary, they seemed to suspect Him of blasphemy or deceit; while He deserved the greater praise. The reason was, their spiritual vision was not so keen as their corporal vision. The same phenomenon is noticeable today. If someone is suddenly or unexpectedly cured of a corporal illness, everyone marvels and is astounded: whereas the world as a rule looks upon the process of the holy sacrament of penance with indifference or suspicion, although through it are achieved

cures of infinitely greater value to the beneficiaries.

No doubt at the pool of Bethesda there were curious spectators observing the various cures that were effected. They freely gave vent to their wonderment when they noticed how invalids who were hopelessly paralyzed, or other sick people who were in the last stages of some deadly illness, were carried into the troubled water and at once emerged in the full flush and prettiest bloom and complete vigor of health. If one had the eye of faith and could penetrate with his vision into the sanctuary of the soul, he would see infinitely greater marvels and more astounding transformations by observing sinners going in and out of the confessionals in our churches. Whatever hideous and seemingly incurable leprosy or other mortal diseases of sin afflicted the soul of the penitent as he entered the confessional, he would be seen, as he issued from it again after a short interval, to possess a soul as pure, as immaculate, as beauteous and God-loving as an angel of the Most High.

The Hidden Image

An enthusiastic Dante scholar had inferred from reading the history of the great poet, that in a certain room of a dilapidated house in Florence, Italy, a painting of Dante must exist. The room had long been used as a lumber room, and was littered with all kinds of rubbish. The walls were

coated irregularly with heavy plaster, and bore no hint whatever of an absconded picture. But the devoted scholar was confident the painting was there. He began to clear away the thick and clumsy covering. Soon traces of the precious picture of Dante became dimly visible, and by and by the entire treasure was disclosed in its pristine beauty.

Many a one comes to the confessional with the supernatural image of God in him daubed over with and entirely obliterated by hideous sin. There would hardly seem to be any hope whatever of this image being reclaimed and reproduced in its primeval luster and loveliness. But "the things that are impossible with men, are possible with God" (Luke, 18, 27). The sinner enters the confessional, makes a contrite recital of his sins, and receives sacramental absolution. While the priest speaks the words of forgiveness the Blood of Jesus mystically flows over, bathes and cleanses the sinner's soul, removing from it at once every vestige of spiritual filth, and rendering it beauteous and lovable as was the soul of the first man issuing from the breath of the all-holy and all-pure God. And the original image and likeness of God in the soul are again as precise and distinct as they ever were.

Pitched Into Cold Water

And yet the process of the spiritual cures which take place in the confessional is not nearly so

difficult nor so taxing as was that of the cures performed by the pool in Jerusalem. It was not in itself an agreeable feeling for the sick and the invalids to wait an indefinite period, exposed to the curious and scrutinizing view of the public in their painful and at times embarrassing illness, and then to be hurriedly pitched into the cold water of the pool with a view to their cure. Yet they did not mind the weary waiting, nor the momentary pain or shock, however severe, in their eagerness to obtain permanent relief and health. Much less should the sincere penitent shrink from waiting for his turn at the confessional, or wince under the momentary pain of self-revelation and self-humiliation in the confessional in his desire to regain peace of mind and the health of his soul.

An Ulcerated Tooth

If the Catholics who stagger at the difficulty and the sacrifice involved in an humble and contrite confession were assured, that for the same labor and pain they could be cured, let us say, of a bad case of rheumatism, or pthisis, or cancer, or even an ulcerated tooth, they would be overjoyed and not hesitate in the least to submit to the ordeal demanded of them. They would no longer consider it an ordeal but a great and most welcome boon. Why, then, do they view and judge less favorably the practice of confession which heals the terrible infirmities of the soul? Because in

their weak and tepid faith they do not look upon the spiritual illnesses with the same alarm and the same eager longing for deliverance as they do upon the diseases of the body. If they had been in the place of the man who was sick of the palsy, they would doubtless have been keenly disappointed at hearing our Lord say: "Be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven thee;" and they might even have irreverently exclaimed: "Is that all, Lord?" But the supposition is useless, for a faith as weak as theirs would have hardly elicited a miracle from our Savior at all, let alone the spontaneous forgiveness of their sins.

The Wonderful Bath

In connection with this reference to the pool of Bethesda we recall the Bible incident of another wonderful bath which took place in the waters of the Jordan, and which was also a figure of the more marvelous spiritual bath of holy penance. The story is interesting enough to be related in detail in the inspired words of the sacred writer. In the fifth chapter of the Fourth Book of Kings we read: "Naaman, general of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and honorable: for by him the Lord gave deliverance to Syria: and he was a valiant man and rich, but a leper. Now there had gone out robbers from Syria, and had led away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid, and she waited upon Naaman's

wife. And she said to her mistress: I wish my master had been with the prophet, that is in Samaria: he would certainly have healed him of the leprosy which he hath . . .

“So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and stood at the door of the house of Eliseus. And Eliseus sent a messenger to him, saying: Go, and wash seven times in the Jordan, and thy flesh shall recover health, and thou shalt be clean. Naaman was angry and went away, saying: I thought he would have come out to me, and standing would have invoked the Name of the Lord his God, and touched with his hand the place of the leprosy, and healed me. Are not the . . . rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel, that I may wash in them and be made clean?

The Servants Had Good Sense

“So as he turned, and was going away with indignation, his servants came to him, and said to him: Father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, surely thou shouldst have done it: how much rather what he now hath said to thee: Wash, and thou shalt be clean? Then he went down, and washed in the Jordan seven times: according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored, like the flesh of a little child, and he was made clean. And returning to the man of God with all his train, he came, and stood

before him, and said: In truth, I know there is no other God in all the earth, but only in Israel Thy servant will not henceforth offer holocaust, or victim to other gods, but to the Lord And he said to him: Go in peace."

This instructive story gives rise to several wholesome reflections on confession. The leprosy of Naaman could be cured in no other way but through the bath in the Jordan. The only means of healing the leprosy of sin in a soul that is baptised is the bath of holy penance. Naaman at first despised the remedy suggested by the prophet. In his eyes it was not ceremonious and pompous enough. His servants, who had more and better sense, convinced him that he had reasons to congratulate himself that the indicated remedy was so easy and feasible. Similarly there are many who despise and sneer at the confessional, because of what they call its puerility and absurdity: whereas the sincere Catholic thanks God for the very simplicity and informality of this wondrous remedy for his soul. As soon as Naaman performed the prescribed washing his leprosy, which was of long standing and evidently incurable, disappeared at once, completely and forever. In like manner, let a soul be ever so diseased through sin and iniquity, of whatsoever kind and virulence, no sooner it washes itself in the spiritual bath of holy penance, it is instantaneously, entirely and permanently healed of its affliction.

The Difference Between the Two Baths

In favor of holy penance this signal difference between the two baths has to be noted: Naaman was the only leper who was cleansed by Eliseus, according to the words of our Lord Himself Who says: "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet: and none of them was cleansed but Naaman the Syrian" (Luke, 4, 27). Countless spiritual lepers are cleansed daily through the holy sacrament of penance.

Had Eliseus prescribed severe and difficult treatments to the patient, say hard, frequent and very painful rubbings for days and months, Naaman would no doubt have submitted to them, eager as he was to be cured of his leprosy. He would have preferred the temporary pain of them to the enduring torture of the loathsome disease. In the same manner, if God chose to do it, when we ask Him to pardon us our sins and release us from the sentence of eternal punishment, He could subject us to very rigid treatments of penance. He is the offended party, and He can give whatever conditions of forgiveness He pleases.

Take Them or Leave Them

God could say for example: "If you want My pardon and your deliverance from the fire of hell, you will have to make a public confession of all your sins and, in addition, fast on bread and water all the days of your life. I will consider nothing

less. These are my terms. Take them or leave them. Either make the public confession and assume the fast, or you will be lost and punished forever." What else could we do but undergo the humiliating confession in public and the rigorous fast? If we had any sense we should infinitely prefer a temporary pain, however long and intense, to endless and unimaginable torments. Should we, therefore, not rejoice and thank God from our hearts that He has chosen to make the conditions of pardon so easy and sweet for us in the holy sacrament of penance?

After his cleansing Naaman was convinced there was no other God but the Lord, and he vowed never to offer holocaust or victim to other gods but to the Lord. He sets a splendid example to every penitent who is healed through penance as to the manner and ardor of his thanksgiving to the Lord. Every good confession must imbue the pardoned sinner with a renewed and reinforced conception of the goodness and greatness of God, and with an abiding resolution to adhere and offer service to Him alone forevermore.

"The Flesh of a Little Child"

The flesh of Naaman "was restored like the flesh of a little child". In the same way through holy penance the soul of the sinner is restored like the soul of an infant that has just been baptized. For this reason the Holy Fathers teach that

penance is a second baptism. These words mean everything they say. In baptism the soul is freed from all sin and delivered from the bondage of Satan; it is adopted as a child of God; it is adorned with sanctifying grace, which makes the soul resemble God and has it to partake, in a most mysterious manner, of the very nature and life of God; it is endowed with various other graces that, with sanctifying grace, constitute the soul and the body, which it inhabits, as a temple of the Holy Ghost and the dwelling of the Most Holy Trinity; it becomes a friend of God and an heir of heaven: all these privileges, without a single exception, and without any diminution whatsoever, accrue to the soul in holy penance also.

One Difference

There is only one difference between the effects of both. Baptism not only takes away every sin and the eternal punishment, but also all the temporal punishment due to sin. Penance takes away every sin and the eternal punishment, but not in every case does it take away all the temporal punishment due to sin. Sometimes it does, namely when the sorrow for sin is perfect and very intense; but often, if not as a rule, some temporal punishment remains to be suffered or otherwise attended to—by means of indulgences, for instance—by the penitent after he has received absolution from his sins.

On the other hand, however, penance confers something valuable to the soul which baptism ordinarily does not convey, namely the restoration of all the supernatural merits that were lost through sin. In and after baptism the soul usually just begins to merit for heaven. It starts its account of supernatural deserts by leading a good life. In penance, however, the soul that through mortal sin lost all its heavenly merits acquired in and after baptism, regains them all, and starts its account for heaven anew with a splendid balance to its credit. Is it not a stupendous privilege to be baptized, as it were, again and again, with so little ceremony and such a wondrous profit?

Baptized Again

That Catholics do not always attend sufficiently to this great boon of holy penance is evidenced by some casual remarks one hears ever and anon. When, for example, a non-Catholic of mature age is baptized and received in the Church, Catholics who hear of it exclaim: "Oh, if I could only be baptized again. Then, indeed, I should be careful to keep my record clean and immaculate. To start one's spiritual record on an unwritten slate, after one has had the experiences of life's hardships and temptations: what a thrill this must be, and what a stimulation to high and persevering virtue!" The Catholic who speaks thus does not

seem to be aware that penance gives the soul the same spotless luster and beauty, and renders the spiritual slate just as clean and unwritten with sin, as does baptism; for the same Blood of Jesus Christ, with the same divine efficacy, washes the soul in both instances. Hence after penance there ought to be the same holy ambition to keep one's record untainted as after baptism. In fact, as was mentioned above, after penance the soul is usually in a much better condition than after baptism, and immensely more dear to God, because of the recovery of all the merits that were forfeited through sin.

Baptized on His Death-Bed

Again, when a non-Catholic is baptized and is received in the Church on his death-bed, and dies right after baptism, Catholics say: "How happy that man, to die immediately after being baptized. He was sure of going to heaven." Yes, he was sure of going to heaven if he was truly sorry for his sins. In an adult this sorrow is necessary if baptism is going to have its full effect. But if you are sorry for your sins when on your death-bed you receive the absolution of the priest, you are just as sure of heaven as the one who is being baptized in adult age, since penance is a second baptism. He may go to heaven sooner than you, as baptism takes away all the temporal punishment together with the eternal; whereas there

may remain a part of the temporal punishment after the reception of absolution, as was stated above: but as to the certainty of salvation there is no difference, since penance conveys it as well as baptism, for it is in reality another baptism.

It may be advisable to add here, that according to the declaration of the Council of Trent no one can be subjectively and absolutely certain of salvation, either after baptism or after penance, unless he have a special revelation to that effect from God. The reason is, no one can be infallibly certain, although he can have a strong moral assurance, that he has the subjective dispositions required to render the sacraments operative.

We can not see or hear it with our bodily eyes or ears; yet our holy faith teaches us that, penance being a second baptism, every time a well-disposed penitent issues from the sacred tribunal, there is verified in his regard what the gospel records of Jesus, as He came out of the water after His baptism, to wit: "And lo, the heavens were opened to Him: and He saw the spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him. And behold a voice from heaven, saying: 'This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased'" (Matt., 3, 16, 17).

Educated Catholic Girls

This sublime and inspiring conception of penance, if it were universally entertained by

Catholics, would not only draw them more frequently and longingly to the confessional, but also actuate them to derive more substantial and lasting fruits of genuine holiness from its reception. Some time ago, at a mission, I was much consoled to hear a prominent and popular young lady of about twenty-eight years say with charming simplicity and glowing emphasis: "I can not understand why so many of our so-called educated and cultured Catholic girls dislike confession and approach it only with a certain dread and revulsion of feeling. As for me, I go to confession every week, and I am always glad when the day arrives on which I go to confession. The weekly confession is the weekly bath of my soul. Before taking it I may feel spiritually uncomfortable, disagreeable and not too peaceful of mind because of certain faults and sins committed during the week. I am therefore eager to undergo a thorough spiritual cleaning. And after my soul's bath in the sacred tribunal I feel like a new person, interiorly comforted, refreshed and rejuvenated. I should feel considerably out of sorts, if perchance I missed my weekly spiritual bath."

The Oasis in the Desert

In the spiritual life the periodical confession should be like the ardently sought-for oasis in the desert. When people undertake a long trip in the automobile, say from coast to coast, they are

happy when they strike a city or town, where they can take a rest and procure the various supplies of which they stand in need; where they can take a good bath and free themselves of all the dust and dirt of the road which they travelled; where they can overhaul their automobile, replenish it with gasoline and oil, and make the necessary repairs; where they get mail from home and, perchance, a remittance of money to carry them farther on their tour. Such a spot of relief and help in the spiritual life the confessional is for everyone who frequents it with the proper disposition. Why not long eagerly for it and fly gratefully to it whenever we have the opportunity?

The Soul's Elim

The Israelites, in their long and weary tour through the arid and scorching desert on their way to the Promised Land, rejoiced and felt greatly comforted when they "came into Elim, where there were twelve fountains of water, and seventy palm trees: and they encamped by the waters" (Ex., 15, 27). In this life we are all wayfarers in a desert. Our destination is the promised land of God: heaven. Our passage through this life's desert is hard and trying. It makes heavy demands upon our spiritual assets of virtue, faith, patience and endurance. Often we are quite undone by the burden and heat of the journey and

struggle. Heartily, therefore, we must welcome the spiritual Elim of the confessional with its wondrous refreshments and splendid shelter for our weary and dispirited soul. At least once every week, if possible, we should "encamp by its waters".

In One of Our American Deserts

Several years ago I had to travel by automobile through the long desert in New Mexico from Gallup to Waterflow, a distance of over a hundred miles. The rainy season was still on, and the roads were well nigh impassable. We got through somehow, thanks to a powerful car and an expert chauffeur, who was in the government service, and who took me along with him as an expression of good will.

When we got far into the desert we came upon a party of tourists, two young men and two young ladies, who were richly and daintily dressed, and who had a very sumptuous car. They seemed to be a wedding party who were on a honeymoon ride from coast to coast. Their car was deeply imbedded in the mud, and they appeared to be helplessly stranded. They presented a rather pitiful spectacle as in their fine clothes they nervously trod around in the mud in evident desperation. They had never dreamed their coast to coast ride would meet with such a misadventure. They waited until finally enough men

gathered from both directions to extricate their car from its confinement, and enable them to proceed on their ill-fated tour. Imagine how eager they were to get to the next town in the shape of an oasis.

Spiritually many a soul, in its roaming through the desert of life, meets with a similar fate. It sinks deep into the mire of sin, or the quicksand of vice, or the slough of despondency. If it has any sense for its safety and comfort, it will be most eager for the oasis of the confessional, in which it can shed the filth of iniquity and clothe itself anew with the robe of spotless sanctity and charming loveliness in the sight of God. Even as the filter purifies the muddiest water, and the crucible cleanses the gold of the most clinging dross, so the confessional restores the well-dispositioned soul, whatever sins may attach to it, to its pristine baptismal purity and luster.

CHAPTER IV.

Deliverance from Bondage

“And He brought them out of darkness, and the shadow of death: and broke their bonds asunder”
(Ps. 106, 14).

AMONG the famous and venerable temples of Rome, the Eternal City, the church called S. Pietro in Vincoli holds a high rank. It is celebrated for containing the world-known statue of Moses by Michael Angelo, which hundreds of tourists visit every day; but it is much more celebrated for treasuring the hallowed chains by which St. Peter was held captive by Herod, and which fell from him at the behest of an angel shortly before he was to be put to death. Throngs of respectful pilgrims pay homage to these sacred chains day by day, and those who are granted the opportunity kiss them lovingly and reverently.

The Chains Fell From Him

It must have been a distinct and sweet relief to St. Peter when suddenly the heavy chains fell from him; and his heart must have gone out to God with warm love and gratitude for his deliverance from prison through the angel. Spiritu-

ally God confers the same bounty on every contrite sinner who receives the sacrament of holy penance. In the life of St. John Baptist Vianney we read that this holy man heard confessions as much as sixteen hours a day. People came from all parts of the world to go to confession to him because of his reputation for holiness and the gift he possessed to read the hearts and consciences of his penitents. Sometimes, as he absolved a great sinner, the saint would hear a big noise as that of heavy chains falling from the person.

God permitted the saint to hear this noise for his comfort and consolation, so he might know that he was not working in the confessional in vain, but that he was delivering many souls from the bondage of Satan. Although this was unusual, and this noise is otherwise not heard in or about confessionals, yet our holy faith tells us that the administration of the sacrament of penance incessantly frees souls from the servitude of the devil, and breaks the chains of sin and vice by which he holds them captive. And while they are not led forth from prison, as was St. Peter, they are antecedently delivered from the prison of hell, to which their sins apparently foredoomed them forever.

The Nun Was Embarrassed

Relatively to the aforesaid story of St. John Baptist Vianney, I recall a comical incident that

happened to me in a retreat I was preaching to nuns. Preparatory to hearing confessions I gave a lecture on the sacrament of penance, in which I related how the saint, at the absolution, often heard a big noise as of falling chains. A young Sister was one of the first to go to confession in the chapel immediately after the lecture. For some reason or other, while she was in the confessional, the large crucifix that was hanging in it became detached, and fell down with considerable noise. It was naturally reminiscent of the story I had told, and no doubt caused the penitent considerable embarrassment. I could not help smiling at the coincidence.

And here I remember another episode in regard to confession from the life of St. John Baptist Vianney. In his zeal for souls the saint was untiring in hearing confessions, in the coldest as well as the hottest weather. In winter he often remarked that his feet were about frozen, since there was no heat in the church in the bitterest cold. The priests of the rectory advised him to get some kind of a heater or a small charcoal stove for his confessional. His spirit of mortification would not let him listen to this suggestion.

Warm Bricks in the Confessional

The priests pitied him, however, and unbeknowns to him succeeded in placing warm bricks under the floor of his confessional every time they

could lure him out for a short respite. He felt much relieved in consequence and, since he did not recognize the source of his greater comfort, he rejoiced exceedingly, thinking God was favoring him in a sort of a miraculous manner. One day at table he could not help saying: "God is indeed good to those who serve Him. While I am engaged in helping sinners to come back to Him, He keeps my feet warm." The holy man never discovered, however, in what particular way God was keeping His zealous servant's feet warm.

Speaking in a figurative manner, and using the expressive language of the day, it is ordinarily not the priest in the confessional, but rather the penitent who is or ought to be in the confessional, that is apt to "get cold feet". Because of this, he is either tempted to stay away from the confessional entirely, or to conceal or disguise his mortal sins in the confessional, owing to a certain unfounded shyness, timidity and human respect. His feet will get warm, however, if we may pursue the homely metaphor, through the help from on high and his own solicitude for the peace of his conscience and the salvation of his soul.

Penitentiary Convicts

If Catholics always adverted to the great bounties conferred by holy penance, far from finding the humble confession of their sins bitter

and irksome, they would experience a certain delight and satisfaction in practicing it. Suppose there were in our country a man who was empowered by the constitution of the land to go into any prison or penitentiary of the nation and, if the inmates or convicts approached him with a confession of their guilt and an expression of sorrow for their crimes, he could pardon them on the spot.

One prisoner would come up to him and say: "Mister, I have committed murder. I am sentenced to this penitentiary for life. I have been here three years, and I must stay here as long as I live. I am sorry for what I have done." The man would answer, saying: "You are pardoned. Take the next train for your home."

At the Point of a Pistol

Another would confess that he had held people up at the point of a pistol and robbed them of all they had; that he had forged checks, and wrecked trains; and that he, too, was consigned to the penitentiary for life. He also maintained that he regretted having perpetrated those crimes. The man would tell him: "You are free; take your belongings and return to your family at once." He would say the same to every inmate who accosted him with a frank confession and genuine sorrow. Would a single one of the convicts find this condition of absolute pardon

difficult and exacting, and shrink from its fulfillment? There would be one dash and one rush for that man. Everyone would be eager for so easy and slight a ceremony of self-humiliation to obtain so grand and generous a pardon.

The Penitentiary of Hell

If you have faith you are aware that, no sooner you commit a mortal sin, you are then and there liable to eternal perdition, and, if you died in this state, you would be consigned to the penitentiary of hell forever. You go to the priest who is endowed by God with the power of pardoning His offenders. You tell him your sins with sincerity and sorrow. In the Name of God the priest says: "I absolve you from your sins." He pardons you once for all. Your sentence is lifted then and there, before you even start to serve your punishment. You need not go to the penitentiary of hell at all. Isn't that a magnificent pardon for so little and easy a ceremony of self-humiliation? And does not the pain of self-effacement vanish in view of the freedom regained?

You say that, thanks to God's grace and protection, you do not commit mortal sins. Your faults are only venial. Many, even pious, Catholics are inclined to make light of venial sins and to be but little alarmed about them. Yet God, in His infinite holiness and justice, does not rate them as something trivial or negligible. The Bible

informs us that He punishes venial sin rather severely and awfully. For a venial sin of curiosity Lot's wife was at once turned into a pillar of salt. For a venial sin of hesitancy in believing that water would spring from the rock he was told to strike, God punished Moses, whom He loved above all men, with the final exclusion from the Promised Land. It was a severe blow, for Moses had longed to see and enter the land of milk and honey with intense avidity and impatience.

You Will Not Get Married

If some one, the day before first holy Communion, or the graduation from school, would tell a child: You will not be with the Communion or graduation class tomorrow; or someone would tell a fond and eager bride, who was all ready for the wedding on the following day: You will not get married tomorrow, nor at any other time: this would be a hard and crushing blow. It was a more stunning punishment when Moses, the pet of God, the very leader of the chosen people, for a momentary fault of weakness, was told by God Himself that he never would enter the Promised Land.

This bit of sacred history gives us an insight into the mood and attitude of God towards venial sin. This insight is rendered clearer and surer by our reflection on the punishment meted out to David, another great favorite of God, for a venial

sin of vainglory. In a fit of self-complacency David was wondering what a grand king he was. He had a census of his kingdom taken up to establish the greatness of his dominion. For this venial sin of vanity God in His anger sent the pestilence into David's country, and seventy thousand of the inhabitants were carried away by death. God no doubt took care of those who died—for they had no fault in David's sin—but David was publicly humiliated for his conceit. This, then, is God's manner towards venial sin.

It is true that some commentators are inclined to consider the aforesaid sins of the biblical personages as mortal; yet it seems the majority of interpreters, in view of all the circumstances involved, lean towards the milder opinion and rate them as only venial sins.

Little Sins

Your little sins consist in nothing more, you say, than in an occasional irreverence towards God's holy Name, or in some wilful distraction in prayer, or unbecoming behavior in church, or in what you call a harmless and serviceable lie, or in some thought of vanity and self-sufficiency, or in some undue curiosity or similar self-indulgence, or in some slight uncharitable thought, word or demeanor: venial sins, all of them; hence you are not worried about them. Who knows, for one such venial sin God in His

wrath will send you some temporal punishment similar to the ones mentioned above; or He may sentence you to the prison of purgatory for who knows how long a period: for He is infinitely just and unspeakably holy, and He hates the least shadow of sin with an immeasurable detestation and execration. You go to the priest and confess your sins with true sorrow. And forthwith he employs his divine pardoning power and says with the authority of the Almighty: "I absolve you from your sins." What could prove more of a sweet and delicious lure to the pardon-hungry soul than this benign tribunal of infinite mercy?

Over a Hundred Years in Purgatory

In the life of St. Bridget of Sweden it is narrated that she had a great devotion to the suffering souls in purgatory. One day, while she was absorbed in prayer, she heard a most pitiful moaning and a heart-rending groaning which she immediately recognized as the plea of a poor soul in great distress and desiring to be delivered from its pains and prison. The plea was so unusual in its intensity that the saint asked whose soul it was. The soul replied: "I am the soul of Pope Innocent the Third."

This pope, one of the greatest in the history of the Church, the friend and patron of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, had been dead over a hundred years; and yet, according to the story,

his soul was still lingering in the tortures of purgatory, either for venial sins, or to liquidate the temporal punishments due to forgiven sins. Of course, this narrative is merely a legend and has no theological argumentative value. Still, it may reflect in a certain degree the belief of the faithful in the fourteenth century regarding the punishment meted out for venial sins, or remaining to be paid for pardoned sins.

We Are All Masked

With this I am by no means saying that confession, or the exercise of revealing one's sins to another, and let him be a priest of God, bound to absolute secrecy, loses its sting even for the best disposed penitent. No; for human nature it will always be a humiliating and painful act. We are proud, vain and conceited by nature, so much so that we are all, more or less, masked before others, even those who are closest and dearest to us. In some manner and degree we are all hypocrites.

To hide facial blemishes and faults, and to acquire an appearance and expression of beauty which is not one's own, the artificial make-up of the face, which in its present degree was until recently restricted to the stage, is now quite generally used, not only by women but also by men. And they have grown so accustomed to their borrowed face that they display it in public

as their own, although they know and others know, and they know that others know, that the face is not their own. Hypocrisy has become conventional and has received the stamp of silent and general public approval. One seems to rival the other in falsifying his face more cleverly and successfully: in other words, in being the better and greater hypocrite.

The Photographer's Art

We want our photographer artistically to retouch our photograph in a way as to remove all warts, moles and scars, and, if possible, to make them appear as dimples or other beauty spots. And we are not ashamed to give these works of art to our friends as our own images, and even then we expect them to tell us that the photo, far from flattering us, hardly does us justice. To such a degree of insanity does our vanity lead us, and to such an extent has hypocrisy become a second nature to us. What is true as to our corporal appearance is no less true with reference to our mental and spiritual manifestation.

We like to pose as being better than we are. We want others to believe that we are better than we know we are. We do what we can to hide our shortcomings, palliate our errors, and minimize our faults. At the same time we like to bring into relief our good traits to accentuate our virtues, and exaggerate our merits.

We Remove the Mask

In the confessional we have to do the very reverse. We are asked to take off the mask we are wearing, and exhibit our moral weakness just as it is. We are to disclose the shady or seamy side of our character, and tell how weak and mean and vile we have been. This hurts our vanity and jars our pride. It never will be a delightful practice as long as human nature remains what it is.

Yet the very desire for divine forgiveness of sin seems to include as a natural condition the call for this penalty of self-humiliation, and the willingness to undergo it. The root of every sin is pride in some form or other. The sinner in every instance is guilty of a conscious self-assertiveness against God, of a wilful uprising against His authority, and a positive or negative defiance of His law. If not in so many words, by his conduct, he invariably says every time he sins: "I will not serve" (Jer., 2, 20). He says to God, as the case may be, by his wayward conduct: "You want me to attend holy Mass today, on a Sunday or holyday; to abstain from meat today, on a Friday; to forgive my enemy; to forego an impure indulgence: but I will do the contrary, merely because I choose to do it."

When, then, the sinner wants pardon from God for his sins, it is quite in order that he begin by humiliating the very pride which was at the root

of his sin, and by humbly and sincerely admitting his faults to the delegate of God, saying: "Father, I was wrong and I sinned when I did this or that, so many times. I am heartily sorry that I did it and I am minded never to do it again."

The Confessor Stops Him

This is so natural a procedure to anyone who is truly contrite, that, hard and repulsive as this confession may be in itself, it becomes so sweet and delicious through grace that the sincere penitent is inclined to say rather more than less against himself in the sacred tribunal. The confessor must often check him, saying: "You have said enough; that will do; God does not expect more of you." Whereas, usually, the most telling sign of lack of disposition in a penitent is the reluctance to confess, in a sincere and unvarnished manner, the sins of which he knows himself guilty. He appears to have little or no sorrow for his sins against God, if he is not even willing to make a candid admission of them to God's representative.

They Fall in Love

People who fall in love with one another and become close and dear friends naturally and spontaneously grow very confiding. They reveal to each other personal, private and very intimate secrets which they would tell no one else. Humil-

iating and embarrassing as this revelation may be in itself, it contains an element of sweetness and deliciousness when it is inspired by love. Frequently lovers are known to exceed the bounds of discretion in revealing their secrets to one another, and often they have occasion to rue it bitterly.

The soul that falls in love with God and consequently hates sin also takes a certain delight in manifesting its sins and failings to God in the person of His representative, the priest in the confessional. And whoever balks at this manifestation plainly evinces a lack of true love to God and genuine sorrow for sin. Far from ever having a reason to regret this sacramental self-revelation, the penitent congratulates himself on it the more fervently and gratefully, the more sincere, complete and crushing it was.

You Throw Yourself Down

More than seventeen hundred years ago, Tertullian, a Father of the Church, expressed himself regarding the sacrament of holy penance, in words such as these: "When you go to confession, you throw yourself down: God picks you up. You accuse yourself: God excuses you. You sentence yourself: God pardons you." The action of God in this process of mercy is in proportion to your behavior of self-effacement. The more you throw yourself down; the more you efface, crush and annihilate your pride and self-sufficiency

by a sincere and humble confession of your guilt, without any regard to your personal feelings, the more God picks you up, and presses you to His heart in complete and unreserved forgiveness, and qualifies you for high honor and great joy in heaven. The more you accuse yourself by an unvarnished objective recital of your sins, the more God excuses you. And the more you sentence yourself, in your own mind and heart, for having offended God; and the more willing you are to accept whatsoever punishment in atonement for your sins, the more easily and liberally God will pardon you. It is comforting to know that somehow we have it in our power to regulate God's conduct and measure of mercy in our behalf.

Everybody Goes

You are not the only one who goes or must go to confession. Every one who has committed a mortal sin after baptism is bound to go to confession if he wants to obtain pardon for his sins and salvation. Good people, who never commit mortal sins, are usually those who frequent the confessional most; not to be delivered from mortal sins, but to be pardoned their venial faults and especially, as was said in a previous chapter, to be strengthened and guarded against every sin, both mortal and venial, in the future.

The most pious and saintly members of the Church, such as the religious, priests, bishops, cardinals and the pope himself go to confession often; once a week, as a rule. For them, too, confession is naturally humiliating and embarrassing; but they love it just the same, and practice it thankfully, because they find it to be propitiatory for and destructive and preventive of sin, through the many graces it imparts.

The Pope Goes to Confession

The Holy Father, the pope, has his special confessor, usually an ordinary priest of some religious order. At least once a week, on the appointed day, at a fixed hour, this priest goes to the Vatican, the palace of the pope. And the rightful successor of St. Peter, the vicar of Christ, the shepherd of the entire fold of Christ, the man who has the keys of the kingdom of heaven, falls down upon his knees before this simple priest. He bows low, beats his breast contritely, and says in all humility: "Father, forgive me, for I have sinned. I have sinned much in thought, word and deed; through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." Then he tells his personal sins. Now if the head of the Church does not shrink from making this humble confession in view of obtaining pardon for his sins, why should you recoil from it?

Your Confessor Goes to Confession

The priest who hears your confession, has to confess his own sins to a priest as well as you. It is not easy for him either, for he is human as well as you. Often, because of the circumstances, it is peculiarly embarrassing to him. He can not go to a stranger as easily as you can. Ordinarily he has to go to a companion and associate with whom he lives in the same house, or anyway, with whom he converses on close and familiar terms. And yet, all in all, he is glad to have the privilege of going to confession, and he finds it to be a great help to him in living up to and in faithfully discharging the arduous duties of his sacred ministry.

If in the entire country there was but one single priest who had the power to forgive sins in the Name and by the power of God, you would like to be near that man of God. You would willingly undertake a long and expensive journey and make other great sacrifices in order to get the benefit of his divine power. Why should you appreciate the gift less because God has rendered it so easy of access?

He Made a Mistake

A Catholic young man had made the mistake of marrying a non-Catholic girl. To his credit it must be said that he realized the risk he was thereby taking with regard to his permanency

and fervor in the faith, to say nothing of the faith of the children God might decree to give him. So he resolved to go to the sacraments every week, that he would not get lukewarm in his holy religion.

The wife was a sensible woman and a good companion. She noticed that on Saturday evening her husband always appeared to be in an exceptionally good mood, humming, whistling and singing for happiness. One day she asked him: "John, why are you so noticeably happy this evening and every Saturday evening?" "Because I have just gone to confession," he answered. "Does that make you feel so good and easy?" she rejoined. "Why, certainly," he replied, "and why shouldn't it? Don't you feel relieved when you have paid a debt that was worrying you, when you are cured of a disease that was threatening your life, when you are received in grace by one whom you have offended, when you recover a treasure you had lost, and when you are released from a severe sentence of imprisonment and fine to which you had been condemned? All of this and more happens spiritually to the penitent who makes a sincere and contrite confession."

"I wish I also could feel so happy, John," the wife continued. "That's easy, Catherine," the husband retorted. "All you have to do is to become a Catholic and go to confession. Then you will experience the same spiritual relief, ecstasy

and joy." "Perhaps I will do so," she said, half to herself and half to her husband. It was not long and she, too, became a good and fervent Catholic. The true faith was a source of solace and comfort to her soul; but no part of it so much so as the holy sacrament of penance.

Medicines and Operations

Summing up, therefore, we can say: To the natural man confession is not delightful, but it readily becomes so when viewed with the eye of faith and the proper appraisal of its supernatural benefits. Medicine that is intended to restore the body to health may be very bitter and offensive to the taste; yet the patient takes it gladly and even eagerly because of its salutary effects. And if the nurse should forget to administer it to him, he reminds her that it is time for him to take the bitter medicine. He enjoys taking it. An operation may be highly unpleasant or disagreeable of itself; but if it promises to relieve and cure you of an acute case of appendicitis, gall stones, or a similar trouble, you will submit to it cheerfully and long for it desiringly. In case the operating surgeon tarries in coming, you say anxiously: "Why doesn't he come? Where is he keeping himself? If he only hurried." So much you long for the unpleasant operation in view of its wholesome prospective results.

"I Can Do Nothing for You"

Whoever is as keen about the health and salvation of his soul as people ordinarily are about the welfare of the body will readily overlook and override all the personal unpleasantness of confession in order to obtain its wondrous divine benefits. This the more hopefully and gratefully, the greater promise he has of being cured spiritually than patients usually have of being healed of their bodily ailments. Every now and then the best and most clever physicians, after they diagnose the patient's case, shake their heads in despair and say: "I can do nothing for you. You have come too late. There's no cure for you." Or they will say: "I may be able to give you some relief, but a permanent cure is out of question." Hardly in any serious case are they able to say with certainty: "If you take the medicine or undergo the operation I am prescribing for you, you will be sure to get well."

Yet, as long as the spiritual patient, the penitent, does what he is told to do by the physician of his soul, and candidly and contritely confesses his sins, he will be immediately, completely and definitely cured of whatever spiritual disease that may attach to him. It was to emphasize this heavenly force or curative power of the sacrament of penance, by means of which it would reach out unto every imaginable sin, however loath-

some, ingrained, malevolently advanced, seemingly desperate and hopelessly incurable, that our Lord, on more than one occasion cured lepers, of whose restoration to health there appeared to be absolutely no hope, and He said to them: "Go, show yourselves to the priests" (Luke, 17, 14). "And it came to pass, as they went, they were made clean" (ib.). Observe incidentally that they had to go to the priests, even though our Lord Himself did the cleansing. Had they not gone to the priests, their cleansing would not have taken place.

Insofar as it can be done without disrespect, one might apply to the sacrament of penance in a spiritual sense what a wag said of old and generous whisky in a material sense. When asked how he could gulp down such a hot and burning drink with so much avidity, he replied: "I do not like the way it tastes; but I like the way it makes me feel." The physiological stimulation of whisky, however, is usually followed by an unpleasant reaction or depression, which is not a sequel to the spiritual animation of holy penance. It were desirable that the reception of the sacrament of penance would always beget in its recipients the same strong and well-nigh irresistible craving for repetition, which the liberal consumption of whiskey unfortunately engenders in its hapless votaries.

Bankrupt

In our cities we have insolvency courts in which a man may invoke the law and have himself declared a bankrupt to shield himself from further annoyance on the part of his creditors. But although the civil law no longer obliges him to pay his admitted indebtedness, because of his disability, yet the debts stand out against him nevertheless and often torture his conscience and his sense of honor not a little. Moreover his assets, whatever they are, are taken from him to meet his liabilities in their measure, and when he leaves the court he is practically dispossessed and shorn of everything. How infinitely more favorable is the lot of the repentant sinner who enters the spiritual insolvency court of the confessional! Not only does he meet and liquidate, through the Blood of Jesus Christ, all the debts he owes God, his divine creditor, but before he leaves the confessional the same God restores to him, through the same Blood of Jesus Christ, all the merits he forfeited through sin, in addition to the countless merits of his sincere conversion. Indeed, "How good is God to Israel, to them that are of a right heart!" (Ps. 72, 1.)

CHAPTER V.

Why Must We Confess Our Sins?

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us"
(1 John, 1, 9, 10).

WHY is it necessary to confess one's sins in detail to the priest? Why is it not sufficient to admit in general to the priest that one has been a sinner? Or, rather, why is it not enough to confess directly and privately to God Himself in order to have one's sins remitted?

These questions are not seldom asked by Catholics as well as non-Catholics, outwardly and inwardly. The reason sins have to be confessed in detail to the priest with a view to their forgiveness is the will of our Savior. Whenever sin has been perpetrated, God is the offended party. He can choose and fix the conditions for pardon, in case the sinner craves or asks for it. As the condition for pardon God through His Son has established contrite confession. Whoever is willing to meet this condition in the proper

manner will obtain forgiveness. Who balks at and declines to live up to it has no chance for pardon. God says with reference to confession, so to speak: "Here is my condition for reconciliation. Take it or leave it." If we have sinned, and have any sense and regard for our eternal salvation, we shall eagerly and thankfully accept so light and easy a condition for so great a pardon.

Judiciary Power

But how do we know that God insists on the observance of confession as a condition for pardon? From His own plain and unmistakable words: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." By these words our Lord gave His disciples and their successors a judiciary power. They were in a given instance either to forgive or retain the sins of a person who had transgressed the law of God. But how would they know, in an individual case, whether they should do the one or the other, unless they were sufficiently acquainted with the sins and disposition of the transgressor? They were surely not to be guided in so important a decision by mere humor or caprice, but by the objective merits of the case. In other words, they were to be guided by the evidence of the facts. But how would they get this evidence and

these facts unless the only one who knew them, outside of God, submitted them? in other words, unless the penitent confessed his sins to them sincerely and completely?

“I Like Your Face”

Say a judge would be holding court in one of our cities. After opening court he would look over the line of those arraigned for various misdemeanors. Then he would call upon one of them and say: “I like your face. Your presence and manner appeal to me. I do not know what you are charged with, and I do not want to know it. But you are free. Go to your home.” Then he would call another prisoner and say: “I do not like the way you look. The expression on your face is suspicious. I know nothing of the complaints brought against you, and I do not want to hear them. But you are going to the penitentiary for twenty years; and you will begin serving your sentence at once.”

If you were a spectator at this travesty of justice you would be shocked. You would exclaim: “Judge, this is not fair. If you are going to speak judgment, first acquaint yourself thoroughly with the evidence in the case and get all the facts of it before you presume to pass on it. How can you know whether one who is indicted should be acquitted or convicted, unless you are thoroughly conversant with the facts in the matter?”

Either, Or

Similarly, since according to Christ's ordinance the priest is either to forgive or retain the sins of a transgressor, how can he know if he should do the one or the other, unless he is candidly told the sins and the disposition of the penitent? No one can tell him these but the penitent; and when the penitent does this he is making a confession. It is most evident, therefore, that Christ wanted him to make this confession to the priest, if he wanted remission of his sins. As Jesus wants the priest to decide the matter, the confession must be made not to God but to the priest.

You may object, saying: "Whilst Christ wants a confession of sins to be made to the apostles and their successors, in case they are asked to forgive them, as stands to reason: still Christ, in the quoted words, does not seem to make it obligatory for anyone to resort to the apostles or their successors for the remission of sins, but rather seems to allow a possibility of this remission by some other way than through the mediation of His disciples. His words do not appear to give them the exclusive concession of this power."

An Exclusive Commission

And yet, if not on the surface, at least in reality, the cited words of Christ convey the exclusive commission of forgiving sins to the apostles and their successors. Why the solemn bestowal of

this wondrous gift upon the apostles on resurrection day, with such extraordinary ceremony, if a sinner could completely evade them and obtain the forgiveness of sin without them? Their power of forgiving sins would then be nugatory and consequently ridiculous. If confession to the priests had not been made mandatory upon all sinners, the very ones who would be likely to profit most from the exercise of confession—as shall be exposed by and by—would carefully and constantly eschew it.

And would it not have been mockery on the part of our Lord to tell the apostles they had the power not only to forgive but also to retain sins, if there were ways of having sins forgiven without their ministry? What would their retention of sins amount to, if the sinner could have the same sins remitted without their intervention, and in spite of their retention of them? And what would the commitment of the keys of heaven to St. Peter, and of the power of binding and losing the bonds of the soul to the apostles, mean, if a sinner could be freed from the shackles of sin without their mediation, and could enter heaven without any supervision or ministration on the part of St. Peter and his successors? If God will not be mocked, as St. Paul tells us, He neither mocks or makes fools of the ministers who aim to serve Him and His cause in uprightness and sincerity.

“Go, Show Thyself to the Priest”

When our Lord with His sovereign power cleansed the leper, He still enjoined upon him to pay deference to the priest, as was prescribed by the law. He said to the cured man: “Go, show thyself to the priest” (Matt., 8, 4). Why, then, should He allow the sinner, who wants remission of his sins, to circumvent or ignore the priests, after Jesus Himself gave them the power to forgive or retain sins? It is evident, therefore, that our Savior made it incumbent upon all sinners to show themselves and confess their sins to the priests, if they desire to have them forgiven.

How much He insists on using human agents as His intermediaries in the great and divine work of conversion our divine Redeemer made known to us by His manner at the conversion of Saul who became St. Paul, the apostle. Jesus appeared and spoke to Him in person. But when Saul expressed his willingness to surrender to Him, saying: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” (Acts, 9, 6), Jesus replied: “Arise, and go into the city, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do” (ib., 7). Just when Saul’s conversion, which was to mean so much to the Church, arrived at its crisis, Jesus gave the work of guiding and determining it to Ananias, who seems to have been just an obscure and merely an ordinary priest in Damascus. Saul was to reveal

and submit his case humbly and contritely to this priest—make a sort of confession to him—and abide by his decision in order to obtain forgiveness from God and be received in the Church through holy baptism.

Confession Is Old

From the very beginning of the human race God required a certain confession of guilt from the sinner who wanted forgiveness. He demanded a confession from Adam and Eve after the fall, and of Cain after his crime. Our Lord, too, asked a confession of Judas at the very perpetration of his betrayal, saying: "Friend, whereto art thou come?" (Matt., 26, 50.) Had Judas but made an open confession then: instead of becoming a suicide the next day, and the most abominable criminal in history for all times to come, and the lowest and foulest of all the damned, he would have got a place of honor at our Lord's crucifixion, and become one of the greatest apostles of salvation, and one of the brightest saints in heaven. So much can depend upon one humble and sorrowful confession; and such terrible results can follow upon the neglect of it. Of the two thieves who were crucified with our Lord, one went directly to paradise with Jesus, because he made an humble confession, saying: "We receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke, 23, 41); whereas the other was apparently lost for-

ever for refusing to make this contrite confession to the dying Savior.

He Was Ashamed to Confess

The famous French writer Francis Coppée frankly admitted, when in the later years he became a devout convert to the faith of his childhood, that as a young man he lapsed into serious sin. Being ashamed to confess it he was soon beguiled into giving up the practice of his faith, in which he had been reared and which he had closely adhered to for several years after his first holy Communion. Many Catholics today gradually lose or give up their faith entirely through their unreasonable dread of confession, which is but another expression for their unbending pride which hinders them from humbling themselves before the minister of God and admitting their sinfulness. King David, after his terrible sins, was not loath to confess them as soon as the spirit of penance was upon him. He cried out: "A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit: a contrite and humbled heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 50, 19). But God does despise a proud and self-sufficient heart that will not duly own its guilt.

The Compensations of Confession

If confession requires a sacrifice of one's pride—which sacrifice in itself is a boon in disguise to

the sinner—it offers many compensations. The ancient philosophers of Greece were convinced that man's best and most profitable knowledge consisted in his knowing himself. Nothing so much helps one to know oneself intimately and thoroughly as the salutary practice of frequent confession. Not only does the examination of conscience enlighten the mind regarding one's real self, but the instruction and guidance of the confessor are a powerful aid to wholesome self-inspection and self-knowledge.

The first and main fruit of this self-knowledge is a humble, childlike and docile spirit, which is a potent asset in every walk of life. It helps us to reach the ideal proposed by our Savior in the words: "Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt., 18, 3). Little children do not find it difficult to go to confession. They rather love to tell their sins in order to have them forgiven by the minister of God. The more we acquire this attitude through virtue and faith, the better we shall fare in this world and the next. Here the words of our Savior come to mind: "I confess to Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise

and prudent, and hast revealed them to the little ones. Yea, Father, for so it hath seemed good in Thy sight" (Matt., 11, 25).

The Soul's Unburdening

Confession is often called the unburdening of the soul. The name is as appropriate as it is significant. The mere revelation of a sin is often a great relief, even as the non-manifestation of it is frequently a veritable torture. There are certain secrets of the heart which are murderers of their subject. They must be let out or they will prove his undoing. They allow him peace neither day nor night. They haunt him wheresoever he goes, and hang like a threatening cloud over him, whatever he does. They poison every joy and take away the very desire of life. The only way to find relief from them is by revealing them to someone. When this relief can or will not be resorted to, the menace of suicide, at times, looms up black and grim. Murderers, who succeeded in evading the police entirely, have been known to surrender of their own accord, sure as they were of being put to death. They preferred a violent death to the infernal tortures of a guilty conscience.

But to whom is one to make this revelation of very private and intimate personal lapses and sins? They are the very things we want most to hide from the ones whom we love best in the world

and who, in all other points, are our reliable confidants. We can not reveal them to one who is a stranger to us for fear of having our confidence betrayed on the one hand; and on the other, for want of trust in his power to help us after we make known our soul's plight to him. The only one who can be a reliable and trustworthy recipient of our innermost secrets is the appointed and consecrated minister of God. He is charged by the Almighty Himself to be the consignee of our heart's secrets and is bound by Him in the most solemn manner to treat these secrets with the utmost confidence and inviolable reticence in every instance; and is empowered by Him to give the torn and wounded soul substantial assuagement and permanent relief from its spiritual burdens and hidden annoyances.

The Approach Is Easy

What makes this heavenly relief more valuable is the circumstance of its easy approach. The confessional is always accessible. All classes and professions of men and women are continuously hastening to and crowding about it. If this were not so: if only those went to confession who stood sorely in need of it for their soul's balm and comfort after a dire spiritual misfortune, they would hesitate to make use of it from shyness and timidity, since their very access to it would betray the distress which they are eager to hide from others.

Now that practically every God-fearing Catholic goes to confession regularly, no one need to fear lest his going will be construed in his disfavor. It is rather interpreted to his credit.

Thus everyone may always make use of this divine institution of mercy to unburden his soul of the heaviest and most unbearable weight of harrowing secrets without observation or notice of any kind. And in choosing the recipient of his secrets he may either select a man of God whom he knows and who knows him, and is therefore more in a position to heal and guide him: or, if he so prefers, he may choose one to whom he is and always will be a complete stranger, but who can still give him every spiritual deliverance and assistance because of the power with which he is invested from on high.

The Christian's Haven

And even outside of the confession of distressing sins, the confessional is a desirable haven for the Christian who is in a particular spiritual danger and needs advice; or whose personal, family or business affairs disconcert and perturb him, and make him desirous of reliable counsel for the rest and security of his conscience: in all these and similar critical conjunctures of life, which are by no means infrequent, it is a real solace to have someone to go to with one's doubts and troubles, assured of ready help and comforting guidance,

and with every guaranty of sacred confidence and unflinching trust.

It is for this reason that many non-Catholics look upon the confessional with a feeling akin to envy. They often wish they, too, had so ready and easy a relief for the secrets that torment them, the sins that weigh them down, the doubts that harass them, and the spiritual trials that compass them about. It is not rare for non-Catholics to come to confession to a Catholic priest. I, as well as many other priests, have had this to happen to me more than once. These non-Catholic penitents, as they themselves at times relate it to their Catholic friends, begin by saying: "Father, I am not a Catholic, but with your permission I should like to make a confession." The priest replies that, since they are not members of the true Church, they can not receive sacramental absolution; yet if it will help them they may make their confession. Not seldom they make a confession of their entire life, so precise and comprehensive that a Catholic could not make one more exact and complete.

When Non-Catholics Confess

The priest then asks them why they wanted to go to confession to a Catholic priest, not being Catholics themselves. They answer that the secret of their sins was like a gnawing worm, eating away all the rest, peace and joy of their

souls. Not being able to stand the torture of it any longer they resolved to take refuge in the Catholic confessional in order to procure relief. They felt they had to tell their sins to someone, and they knew of no one to whom they could tell them with reliance and trust but to the Catholic priest in the confessional. And after telling them to him they feel a great surcease of worry and a joyful calm of soul.

When their confession is over, they inquire of the priest, if they may hope to be pardoned by God after offending Him so much and so often. The priest assures them that God's mercy is infinitely greater than any kind or number of offenses and injuries aimed at Him can ever be. And every soul that truly loves Him because of His goodness and loveliness, and is sincerely penitent for ever having hurt or grieved Him, is sure to be encompassed by His ready forgiveness, and enriched by His bounteous grace, and befriended by His delicious love. They leave the confessional with an awe and a childlike wonderment at the infinite mercies of the Lord, and not without a wistful longing to be members of the Church which declares and dispenses His benevolence with such profuse sympathy, and motherly kindness, and wondrous adaptation to every need, urge and cry of the human soul. And through going to confession they not seldom re-

ceive the grace of the true faith, and become members of the body as well as of the soul of the one true Church.

Many Protestants Clamor for Confession

Considering all this, it is therefore not surprising that even famous non-Catholic writers have recognized the moral and social value of confession, and declared it to be a very wise institution. Certain Protestant churches have been and are trying to introduce the practice of it among their adherents; and this movement is perhaps stronger among the laity than among the clergy of these respective churches. In spite of his uncontrollable hatred of the Church and everything pertaining to her, the infidel and cynic Voltaire admitted that confession is the strongest check against secret vice, adding that, if the confessional did not exist, it ought to be instituted.

The great philosopher and scientist Leibnitz, who was a Protestant, conceded that there is an element of divine wisdom in confession, for it is a powerful deterrent from sin, before it is committed, and a remedy and propitiation for sin, after it is committed.

A Caution Against Sin

Everyone who practices confession knows what a repressive caution it contains against a sin to which one is tempted. The very thought: "I

shall have to confess this to the priest if I do it," often is more effective in restraining one from sin than other, although in themselves higher and nobler, considerations. Our Lord tells us we should fear God more than men. But the best of us often have more dread of the opinions of men regarding us than of the appraisal God makes of us. God has turned this weakness of ours to our own advantage in the confessional. If we exploit it properly, it shall aid us mightily in becoming more virtuous and holy from day to day. Similarly, when the confessor warns us in person against a certain moral danger, or relapse into sin, or holds us to the restitution of ill-gotten goods, or the payment of our debts, or the reparation of a reputation we have shattered, or of a scandal we have given, it hits us more directly and grips us more forcibly than if God by the interior voice of conscience alone made His will in these matters known to us.

A venerable old priest used to have the habit, as he rose from his knees upon receiving absolution in the room of the young priest to whom he went to confession, of saying in a voice that bespoke humble appreciation and warm gratitude: "Father, it's a wonderful institution." We do not all of us utter, but we no doubt experience, the same sentiments of wonderment and thankfulness whenever we are told that we may go in peace, since all our sins are forgiven us. Of a

truth, confession is a wonderful institution. It required all the wisdom, mercy and power of God to devise, found and maintain so marvelous a dispensation of heavenly bounty and human relief.

If So Wonderful—Why Obligatory?

If confession is so wonderful an institution, you may be saying after having read this, why has it been made obligatory? Why not let everyone use his own judgment and pleasure in making use of it or not? If it is in reality so grand a boon, people will flock to the confessional without being forced thereto by any law. The fact alone that a solemn law is needed to lead people to the confessional seems to be indication enough that its great and undeniable values are not outstanding and conspicuous.

To this I answer that some good and blissful things of life, the benefits of which no sensible person denies, are obligatory by law, for instance the unity and indissolubility of marriage, the exercise of divine worship, the reception of holy Communion, the attendance at holy Mass; and in civil matters, the payment of taxes, military duty, and ever so many other items, the beneficial nature of which no one denies, but which would not be gained if there were no law rendering these splendid things mandatory. The same is true regarding confession. Children must often be forced to go to school, or to visit a dentist or

physician. It is altogether in their interest that they are forced. In this sphere of the spiritual life we are, alas, like children: hence God forces us by law to frequent the very salutary tribunal of penance for our own personal benefit no less than for the benefit of society at large, and mankind on the whole.

People Would Suspect Things

As was said above, if not everyone who sinned had to go to confession, but only such as chose to go: the going would be harder than it is now, for it would easier give rise to sinister suspicions in others and to painful embarrassment in the penitents. They would imagine others were thinking all kinds of things when they were being seen going to confession. Moreover, in this supposition the priests would not be so punctual, continuous and easy of access in the confessional as they are now. There would be comparatively few confessions, and the priests would likely have to be summoned for each individual case not without ostentation and consequent vexation.

The Democracy of the Confessional

The universal obligation of confession, regardless of the class, profession or rank of the sinner, contains a most wholesome element of healthy democracy. Whatever difference there may be elsewhere in life, and even in the different phases

of religious administration and practice: in the confessional every personal difference is eliminated and every social and other distinction vanishes; there no one is anything else than a poor sinner, kneeling at the feet of God's representative, admitting his utter sinfulness, and pleading humbly and contritely for mercy and forgiveness. In the confessional it counts for nothing for one to be prominent in civil, political, commercial, professional, ecclesiastical or any other kind of life: or if it counts for anything it rather aggravates than relieves the case for the penitent because of his added responsibilities. Here the words of the Bible apply very pointedly: "There is no respect of persons with God" (Rom., 2, 11); "there is no distinction . . . : for the same is Lord over all, rich unto all that call upon Him" (Rom., 10, 12), "Who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to everyone's work" (1 Peter, 1, 17).

The Humble Archbishop

In one of our cities, at a public banquet in connection with a great religious ceremony, a speaker took occasion to eulogize the archbishop of the diocese for his wondrous achievements and, in the presence of several cardinals and other high ecclesiastical dignitaries, he expressed the hope that the archbishop would soon be invited by the Holy Father to be a member of the sacred college of cardinals.

In his reply the archbishop nicely stated that, much as he appreciated the kindly sentiment that inspired its utterance, he himself by no means shared the hope, or entertained any desire, of becoming a cardinal. "Soon," he said, "we shall all be standing before the judgment seat of God, without any other personal insignia but our works. These alone will count for or against us. Hence in the end they alone matter."

The tribunal of penance in this regard resembles the tribunal of God's judgment. No honors, titles or distinctions come in for any consideration for their own sakes: the penitent kneeling before the priest is judged only by his personal conduct and disposition. What helps a great deal towards the maintenance of this complete democracy and absence of respect for persons is the circumstance that, as a rule, the priest is ignorant of the identity of the persons confessing to him. He is to deal with souls just as they are or appear to him to be.

The Humble Bishop

Some time ago a saintly bishop came to a Franciscan monastery with the desire of going to confession. The only priest available was a young friar who had just been ordained. When he was told to hear the bishop's confession, he was not a little nervous. After the bishop recited his sins the neopresbyter started his admonition

by saying: "Your Lordship." The bishop interrupted him at once by interposing: "Here I am not a lord, but only a poor sinner, and I want you to treat me as such." Every true penitent has similar sentiments in the confessional, whatever may be his rank or title outside of it.

The great Bossuet, the Eagle of Meaux, was once taken to task by a lady of the nobility for not being as much interested in her spiritual condition as her high rank seemed to call for. He answered her charge by replying, that he knew of only one real title of nobility which the human soul possesses, and which challenges every reverence, and that is her being an image and likeness of God. All other things, over against this distinction, are puerile and unworthy of attention. If anywhere, this noble and impartial evaluation of men is made in the confessional. Being, or wanting again to be, an image and likeness of God is the only thing in the penitent that interests the priest and enlists his hearty sympathy and cooperation, independently of all other considerations.

A Social and Cultural Boon

It was alleged above that confession benefits not only the individual penitent but also society at large and mankind in general. There is no stronger factor for the promotion and preservation of religion, justice, loyalty, social purity, public honesty, obedience to authority, and

similar virtues, upon which the social fabric rests, and which condition true culture and civilization, than the confessional, if it is duly and regularly frequented. They who have been habitual votaries of it know from their own and others' experience what a powerful stimulant it is to "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever lovely, whatsoever of good fame" (Philipp., 4, 8).

Parents Rejoice

This explains why Catholic parents rejoice and feel at ease when they observe their children, especially their adolescent and grown-up sons and daughters, going to confession regularly; why husbands and wives are never tempted to doubt or suspect one another's loyalty, as long as they know that their consort is accustomed to go to confession frequently; and why not only Catholic but also non-Catholic employers feel perfectly safe regarding the honesty of their employees when they are aware that these employees confess their sins to the priest periodically and often.

In truth: "Great are the works of the Lord . . . Being a merciful and gracious Lord . . . He hath sent redemption to His people . . . The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A good understanding to all that do it: His praise continueth for ever and ever" (Ps. 110).

CHAPTER VI.

Confession Is Easy

"I said, I will confess against myself my injustice to the Lord; and Thou hast forgiven the wickedness of my sin" (Ps. 31, 5).

THERE are only two classes of people for whom confession is difficult. The first is made up of those who are living in grievous sin and are resolved to continue in it. As long as they are of this mind confession is not only hard to them, but they are incapable of receiving absolution. This is not the fault of the sacrament of penance, however, but their own. As soon as they are willing to renounce their wickedness, confession, as was exposed in the previous chapters, will become sweet and easy to them. And not seldom the very approach to the sacrament of penance is the best means of conceiving a real hatred and abhorrence for sin.

He Could Not Go to Confession

In the life of St. John Baptist Vianney we read that one day he was accosted by an officer of the army who had been drawn to visit the holy pastor of Ars by the latter's reputation for sanctity. The officer had suffered shipwreck of his faith, and he

found it particularly hard to believe in confession. In this state of mind, of course, confession seemed to be altogether out of question for him. Yet he no sooner approached the holy man of God, when the saint bade him kneel down and make his confession. The officer rejoined that he had not come to go to confession; in fact, that he did not believe in confession, and consequently could not receive the sacrament. The saint insisted that he simply had to obey and start his confession.

As if under the power of the apostolic man's suggestion, the officer willingly or unwillingly knelt down and began the recital of his sins. As he proceeded, tears of deep and warm penitence began to flow from his eyes. Not only faith in the sacrament, but also genuine love of God and intense sorrow for his sins came to him in and through his self-humiliation before the priest of God. He arose a different man, filled with absorbing gratitude to God for the institution of this wonderful board of ready and complete pardon for sin, and with a strong, tender and grateful reverence for the saintly priest who was God's instrument in his conversion. Even as the publican in the gospel he left the church justified, and very, very happy.

One Can Say Many Sins in a Short Time

For such as have been away from the confessional for a long time, and have led a most sinful

life in the meanwhile, confession is not at all hard provided they are now actuated by the love of God and true sorrow for their sins. The length of time since their last worthy confession does not materially increase the difficulty of their present confession. If one is truly contrite one can recall and recite many sins in a short time and without much strain of mind or memory. Of whatsoever penitent God merely requires what is human. He never exacts anything that is superhuman, or beyond one's actual strength and capacity.

When in preparing for and going to confession the sinner makes a serious human effort to confess his sins as well as he can, with sincerity and sorrow, he does his part towards obtaining forgiveness. God will do the rest. The penitent must leave something to be done by the power of the divine sacrament. It is a mistake for him to believe and to act as though the entire process of forgiveness was due only to his personal efforts. Scrupulous people, whose case we shall consider presently, easily make this big mistake to the destruction of their peace of mind and rest of heart.

A Good Suit of Clothes

What is a serious human effort? The same application of mind and good will which we employ upon all matters of importance in every other department of life. Say you intended to buy

yourself a good suit of clothes. You planned to pay about fifty dollars for it. You went to the clothing store, and the salesman exhibited for your inspection several models of suits. One appealed to you at once. You liked the shape, color and material of it. You asked the price. You were told the suit cost \$48.50. You agreed to buy it. You counted your money carefully: four ten dollar bills, one five dollar bill, three ones and a half dollar. You counted the money a second time. You did not want to give the salesman too much or too little. You found the sum correct. You handed over your money and asked the suit to be sent to your address. You wrote the address carefully, and read it over, to make sure that it was correct. That finished the transaction as far as you were concerned. You did your part. You were all there. You were attentive to the matter at hand, and you were in earnest about dispatching it justly. That is what is called a serious human effort.

Sincere and Sorry

If you act in a similar way, from a supernatural motive, of course, when you go to confession, without any undue nervousness, excitement or perturbation of mind: you are thoroughly sincere in telling all your mortal sins, according to their kind, number and those circumstances that add a new sin, as well as you are in a position to do it, in

view of your religious training and gift of memory; and you are truly sorry for them because by them you have offended God Whom you now love above all things; and you are fully resolved not to sin again: then no matter how materially incomplete your recitation of sin may be, and how many mortal sins you unintentionally forget to mention; or what necessary details you unwittingly omit: your confession is valid, and through the absolution of the priest all your sins are forgiven, those you forgot no less than those you mentioned. You did what you could, and God does not expect more of anyone.

“Thou Art All Fair . . . And There Is Not a Spot in Thee”

Not only all your sins, committed since your last worthy confession, but all your sins of your entire previous life are altogether and unconditionally forgiven by this confession. Of course, in case after your confession you remember a mortal sin which you forgot to mention, you will have to make mention of it in your next confession. The sin is forgiven, but the obligation to confess it must be satisfied if the remembrance of the sin revives. But after the confession I have described above you are under no obligation whatever to exert yourself to re-examine your conscience to find whether something escaped you or not. Once you have made an earnest effort to

confess well, you have done your part. The sacrament does the rest. Hence, if you are wise, and if your love of God is coupled with a great trust in His mercy, as it ought to be, you will forego every attempt to recall your past individual sins, the ones you recounted in the confessional and also those you inculpably forgot. And you will abandon yourself unrestrained to the sentiments of joy and gratitude to God for the great and absolute pardon you have received.

They Exaggerate

Many, especially pious people, are prone to exaggerate the duty of the recital of sin in the confessional. In their conduct, at least, they make it to be far and away the most essential and therefore the most important element of the sacrament of penance, when in reality it holds the third place in importance. First comes contrition, without which forgiveness of sin is unthinkable. Next in order is the absolution of the priest which, joined to attrition, or imperfect contrition, in the penitent, remits the recited and the forgotten sins. Finally comes the due recitation of sin according to the relative ability of the penitent. Consequently the nature and value of this recitation must not be stressed beyond due proportion and rendered so difficult and exacting as to intimidate even the well-meaning penitents.

Sobriety and Common Sense

It is absurd, and a reflection upon God's mercy, to act as many pious people do, and to strain oneself to such a degree in trying to find and tell one's sins, as though God could and would not as easily and readily forgive inculpably forgotten sins as He forgives recited sins. As long as the penitent has a good will, and the love of God and the hatred of all sin in his heart, it makes no difference with God whether a certain sin, or even a multitude of mortal sins have been unintentionally overlooked: He forgives them all without exception and distinction.

Not as though I was aiming at having people make light of confessing their sins and treat it listlessly and superficially, as being of little or no account. God forbid! But I should feel happy if my words succeeded in persuading certain conscientious and God-loving people, who are over-anxious and meticulous about telling their sins, to practice sobriety and common sense in this momentous feature of practical Christianity; to remember that God's mercies are over all His works; and to consult their peace of mind and earn for themselves the pleasurable and consoling experiences of religion to which their piety entitles them.

“She Hath Done What She Could”

Nothing confirms me more in this attitude than the very comforting words of Jesus with regard to St. Mary Magdalen, the model penitent. Our Lord said to her critics: “Let her alone, why do you molest her? She hath wrought a good work upon Me . . . She hath done what she could” (Mark, 14, 6, 8). It seems to me every time a scrupulous and over-timid penitent plagues the soul by straining the duty of the examination of conscience, the recital of sin, or the integrity of confession, our Lord lovingly chides, saying: “Let her alone; why do you molest her? She hath wrought a good work upon Me. She hath done what she could.” Why expect more?

Every time we go to confession with a good will to get back to God through love and sorrow the Church, without our saying a word about it, goes on the assumption, that we include in our confession all our forgotten sins; all our doubtful sins; all our venial sins; and all our doubtful confessions and Communions of our entire life. These are all forgiven in every good confession just as completely as the sins we actually remember and confess. When we consider this we shall not be too worried and fearful lest possibly one or the other mortal sin or essential circumstance of a sin may escape us in our examination of confession. In other words, in this important item of Christian life we shall observe the words of the

Apostle to the Romans (12, 3): "For I say, by the grace that is given me, to all that are among you, not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety, and according as God hath divided to everyone the measure of faith."

Too Much Is Never Good

It is possible and, for human nature, quite easy to exceed in everything. But nowhere is excess laudable or desirable. The saints agree in saying that even the fear of sin ceases to be wholesome when it becomes immoderate. "The harder we sweep," St. Philip Neri used to say, "the more dust we raise." But the dust is often the very nap or substance of the carpet which we wear out by excessive sweeping.

They say there are priests, over-timorous of conscience, who at holy Communion of the Mass are so intent on gathering the sacred particles possibly remaining on the corporal that they wear out the corporal by scraping it unduly; and then they wear the gold off the inside of the chalice by drying it too hard after the consumption of the ablution. In this they are an illustration of the conduct of those who from excessive conscientiousness wear out their judgment and good sense by their unreasonable efforts and inordinate fears in examining their conscience, in eliciting the act of contrition or the purpose of amendment, in telling their sins, or in saying their penance.

The story of the woman, whose passion for cleanliness was so intemperate that she scrubbed the floor of her kitchen so hard that it finally wore out and gave way, so that she fell through it, bucket and all, also brings home the moral that one may be so unduly intent upon examining his conscience or making sure of being sorry for sin that his reason, the very foundation of both acts, finally reels, and becomes unsteady and unreliable. In no phase whatever does nature suffer itself to be violated with impunity.

The Widow's Mites

One day Jesus was in the temple and "He saw the rich men cast their gifts into the treasury. And He saw also a certain poor widow casting in two brass mites. And He said: Verily I say to you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all. For all these have, of their abundance, cast into the offerings of God: but she, of her want, hath cast in all her living that she had" (Luke, 21, 1-4). When people go to confession, there are those who, because of their great learning, can and do say their sins with great precision and circumstantial delineation. They are sorry for their sins and receive forgiveness.

Others, devoid of theological knowledge and poorly instructed in the faith, say their sins as they know how to say them. They, too, are sorry for having offended God. Their forgiveness is

just as complete as is that of the former penitents. At times, in fact, they even derive greater benefit from the sacrament of penance, notwithstanding the material incompleteness of their recital, in consequence of their greater love of God and deeper contrition for sin. As the widow into the treasury, they cast into the reception of the sacrament all they have. And the Lord, observing them, is much pleased.

“A Hundred Years Ago”

A famous American archbishop used to relate the story, that one day an old Irish lady came to him and asked leave to go to confession. Before he heard her confession he asked her when she confessed the previous time. She surprised him much by replying: “A hundred years ago.” The archbishop thought that, being old, the woman was childish and was in ignorance of the real interval. When he asked her why she stayed away from confession so long she explained that, when she was a girl of seventeen years in Ireland, the priest treated her harshly, as she then thought, in the confessional. She then and there swore, that she would not go to confession again for a hundred years. “And God has been good to me,” she continued, “for now the hundred years are over, as I am a hundred and seventeen years old, and I am no longer bound by my oath, and I want to go to confession.”

A Bad Oath

The lady never was bound by that sinful oath, of course. But here the question is in order: Was it very hard for this woman to cover the period of a hundred years by her confession? Not at all, if she had genuine sorrow for her sins. She could think of and say very many sins in a brief period. If she confessed, for instance, that in all those hundred years she never attended holy Mass a single time: think of the number of sins she told in that one phrase. Similarly with regard to other sins. If, then, she could dispatch the confession of a hundred years with comparative ease and expeditiousness, why should you hesitate to go to confession because of the protracted period that has perhaps elapsed since your last worthy confession? At the worst it does not attain a hundred years.

The celebrated French Jesuit, Father Felix, one day heard the confessions of three men. The period of their three confessions together, as they mentioned to friends after they were shriven, extended over one hundred and fifty years. But since they were all three of them contrite and eager to return to God, and procure grace and salvation, the three confessions did not require much time at all. On the other hand a zealous penitent tells of himself that one day he went to the rectory and asked to make a life's confession. He had not gone to confession for fifty years. He

had tasted all the bitterness of sin and was determined to make a clean breast of all his iniquities to the priest of God, in order to be pardoned by the Lord, and to sacrifice the rest of his days to godliness and virtue.

A Long Confession

The penitent knelt down, straight on the floor, without any support, in the priest's study, and made his confession. He begged the priest to allow him to say everything just as he had prepared it in his mind after a lengthy and most painstaking examination. It seems almost unbelievable, but my informant stated emphatically that this man knelt and recited his sins without interruption four hours in the morning and four additional hours in the afternoon. He insisted on doing this to procure peace of mind. Laudable as were the penitent's intentions in this case, his method of recital will hardly serve for imitation. I have no doubt in my mind, that in ten minutes this man could have made a complete and perfect confession of all the sins it took him eight hours to tell, and with the acquisition of the same peace of mind. "The mercies of the Lord are over all His works."

The Young Man's Confession

Some people, who have remained away from the confessional for years, dread to go to confession

merely because they do not know how to confess. They would gladly say all their sins in order to get forgiveness from God, if they only knew how to go about it. This fear is unfounded. Once a person is well disposed through the love of God and sorrow for sin, the process of confession itself should offer no special difficulties, let alone prove a hindrance to the obtainment of divine pardon. One time a young man, who had fallen into many gross and divers sins, but whom the grace of God had inspired with a disgust for his vicious life and with a desire to return penitently to His Creator and Redeemer, accosted a priest with a view of relieving his mind. He began to tell the priest in a general way that his remorse of conscience was such as to embitter every phase of his life, and he felt he could sustain it no longer.

The priest asked the youth why he did not go to confession, in which he could unbosom and unburden himself once for all. The youth replied that after his terrible record confession was out of question, since he would be at a loss where to begin and how to continue in reciting his hideous list of sins. The priest went on asking him question after question regarding his life as they strolled leisurely up and down a walk near the church.

He Was Surprised

After they had conversed a while in this manner the priest asked the young man if he was truly

sorry for having offended God by his sins. The youth protested that his chief pain was the consciousness of having offended so good and dear a God in so blatant a manner. If he but knew that God forgave him everything, he would be very happy, and he would never, never sin again. Then the priest said: "My son, kneel down, and receive this forgiveness of God, for you have made a perfect confession." The young man was making his confession without being aware of it, and after he got the absolution all his fears and haunting remorse subsided, and made room for the sweetest peace of mind and joy of heart. He had no idea confession was as easy as all that.

Perhaps no sentiment is so prevalent in restraining sinners from the confessional as the feeling of pride and false shame. They are ashamed and sometimes afraid to tell the priest their sins. They dread the sinister opinion the priest will conceive of their character, and what he might say to them after their disgraceful revelations of their life. It is the way of the devil to use one ruse to capture souls, and another to hold them in captivity. When he wants to conquer a soul he minimizes the burden of confession and emphasizes how easy it will be to tell the priest the sin to which he is tempting his victim. But once he has beguiled the soul into sin, he turns about and tries to fill her with an invincible

dread of the manifestation of it in the confessional by exaggerating the shame to which it will expose her.

A Hundred Dollar Bill

In answer to this insidious temptation it is wise to remember, after one has sinned, that whilst it was a great shame to sin, it is no shame but rather a great credit to confess one's sins humbly and contritely. Moreover, the revelation of sins in the confessional is as common as the exchange of money in the bank. You are not going to surprise a banker by bringing money to him, for he sees money all the time; nor will you astound him by bringing him bills of large denominations, say of a hundred or even a thousand dollars. He has seen and handled them often, and he handles them daily. In like manner you will not surprise or shock the priest in the confessional, if you tell him sins, however gross. Sins are practically the only subject the priest deals with in the confessional. He hears them continuously; the same ones you are to tell him, and many that are much worse than yours. Hence, by your revelation you will neither cause wonderment nor provoke indignation in the minister of God.

A Ten Dollar Bill

While preaching on confession, and treating of the phase of it which we are now considering, a

famous missionary, who died in recent years, had the practice of suddenly drawing a ten dollar bill from his pocket and, flashing it before his audience, he declared solemnly: "If anyone of you comes to me to confession and tells me a sin I have not yet heard in the confessional, I will give him ten dollars for every such sin he tells me." The offer seemed liberal and hazardous, on the face of it, but I never heard of any penitent collecting the money. It was but a novel and original way of impressing upon the hearers the truth that human nature is uniform, and that sin is a common inheritance of the children of Adam and Eve, the first sinners, and ever will be to the end of time.

In the confessional the priest is the judge and the physician of the soul. Is a judge surprised or shocked when the prisoner admits a transgression of the law to him? Does any prisoner fear he is telling the judge something he never heard before? When a patient goes to the physician to be cured or relieved has he the conviction he is going to reveal a new sickness or some unheard-of symptoms of disease to the doctor? Does he rather not go there with the consciousness that the doctor is expecting to hear just such things from him as he has heard from countless other previous patients?

Measles and Pneumonia

In a way, a doctor is more pleased when he has a hard case to deal with to test his ingenuity and

skill in chasing sickness and restoring perfect health than when just an ordinary slight indisposition is submitted to his care. To have cured a common case of measles does not flatter a physician: but to have saved a patient suffering from double pneumonia is a source of gratification to his doctor. Similarly a priest in a manner feels much more gratified when a great but penitent sinner kneels at his feet, and seeks his help to be freed from his sins and get back to God and goodness of life, than if an ordinary pious and virtuous penitent approaches him with nothing more than a few distractions in prayer or other venial faults. Much as he thanks God for the innocence of the latter, he is more delighted by the penitence of the former. Recalling the beautiful words of Jesus, it is true not only in heaven but also in the confessional, "that there shall be joy upon one sinner that doth penance more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance" (Luke, 15, 7).

Bass, Perch or Minnow

To His disciples Jesus said: "Come after Me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (Matt., 4, 19). In pursuing this beautiful metaphor of our Lord, may we not reverently say, that even as a fisher is immensely more delighted when he catches a large bass or perch than when he merely gathers in a tiny minnow, so, too, a priest in the confessional experiences far greater joy when

there comes into the apostolic net of the confessional a big sinner, who is truly penitent, than when a penitent of just ordinary venial faults approaches it.

One Our Father

To the priest in the confessional, then, sin is nothing new from whatsoever source its revelation may come. He remembers that our Lord has everyone to pray daily "forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors" (Matt., 6, 12). Jesus did not compose two "Our Fathers", one for the sinless and the other for sinners: but He composed only one, foreseeing that all His disciples would be sinning sometimes and somehow. And the priest recalls, too, the words of the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (John, 20, 2): "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (1 John, 1, 8-10).

From all this it is evident how futile and ungrounded is the fear of certain penitents who say within themselves: "What will the priest think of me if I tell him these horrid sins?" First of all, go to some priest to whom you are and always will be a complete stranger. Nowadays, especially in our country, it is usually very easy to have access to

the confessional of a priest who does not and never will know the penitent. Hence, if he does not know who you are, it makes very little difference what he thinks of you, since, whatever it will be, his opinion in its application is too general and indistinct to hurt or even affect you at all.

The Priest Knows You Personally

Yet let us suppose the priest knows you personally and is a close and dear friend to you, and has been your confessor for a long time, and this is the first time you have very humiliating sins to reveal to him; what will he think of you after he hears your story? Will he not change his good opinion of you once for all, and allow his friendship for you to grow cold, and his high esteem of you to lapse? Nothing of the kind. If his mind and heart follow the ordinary laws of psychology, your self-effacing revelation will rather increase his admiration of and his respect for you. In his eyes you very likely display much more virtue and greater heroism by this one self-debasing and self-annihilating manifestation than by any other acts or traits he has ever become cognizant of in you.

Moreover, the priest being human as well as you, he has had his own spiritual experiences of how weak and frail human nature is or can be. Not that he has committed the same sins you have to confess; but he is fully aware that, if God's grace had not sustained him, and did not sustain

him every minute of the day, he would have sinned and would sin a thousand times worse than you. In view of this, his native and inherent weakness and sinfulness, he is inclined to be considerate and sympathetic to whatsoever sinner kneels truly contrite at his feet and is pitilessly selfless in his recital of sins. It is for this reason, too—oh, the height and the depth of the mercy of God!—that God instituted not sinless angels but sinful men as the ministers of the sacrament of the forgiveness of sins, so that their own precarious spiritual condition might inspire them with a better and kindlier understanding of the frailties of others, and with a proportionate forbearance and gentleness towards them.

Men, Not Angels, Ministers of Pardon

If you knew a physician once had or at least was threatened with the same illness you have: he had the various symptoms of it and had to fight continuously against the attack of and his predisposition for it: would you not take heart to reveal your case to him, feeling he would readily understand and make every reasonable allowance and be in a favorable way to prescribe a suitable remedy for it? To give you the same heartening assurance towards the candid confession of your sins, our Savior ordained men, not angels, as the ministers of the sacrament of penance. And every priest who hears confessions knows from his own

experience as well as from his knowledge of human nature acquired in the confessional how true are the words of St. Augustine who says that we advance more in perfection by humbly regretting the sins we have done than by rejoicing over those we have escaped.

There Is Another Side

The priest knows furthermore that, whilst in the confessional you tell only your sins, you could say a great deal on the other side, too, if there was a call for it. He feels that for every moral defeat you confess you could recount a number of victories over sin in the face of the fiercest temptations and the most insidious assaults of the flesh, the world and the devil. In his heart he gives you far more credit for the many times you did not sin than he is inclined, as you suppose, to discredit you for the far fewer times you sinned. And again you will leave the confessional considerably higher in his appreciation than you entered it.

A story is told of a non-Catholic minister who was engaged to preach the sermon at the funeral of a man who was universally known as a ne'er-do-well and a scoundrel. His reputation in the parish and among his relatives was *nil*. Everyone in church wondered what kind of eulogy the minister, who was known to be particularly clever in his funeral orations, would dedicate to the

deceased. They thought for once the artful speaker would be foiled and non-plussed. He was not, however. He began his sermon, saying: "My dear Brethren: Little needs to be mentioned regarding the life of the deceased. It was an open book. You know it as well as I. Yet this much can be said in favor of the man whose funeral we are attending that, bad as he was, he was not so bad all the time as he was sometimes." Similarly, whatever your spiritual record may be, the priest will at least know to his consolation, that you were not so bad all the time as you were sometimes.

Ananias and Saul: Confessor and Penitent

Another thing the priest knows is, that the humble confession of serious sins is usually the harbinger of great subsequent sanctity in the penitent. The example of Ananias and Saul, after the latter's conversion at the gates of Damascus, is before him. Ananias was a holy priest; but he was fully conscious that the penitent at his feet was or would soon be far dearer and greater in the sight of God than he himself. Consequently he treated Saul with a certain awe, a secret admiration and a tender regard. The priest in the confessional experiences the same sentiments on behalf of every genuine penitent that lays bare the wounds of his soul to him without any regard for his personal feelings or reputation.

In Lystra, after Paul had cured a lame man, the inhabitants looked upon Paul and Barnabas as gods and they came to offer sacrifice to them. The apostles, rending their clothes, cried out: "O men, why do ye these things? We also are mortals, men like unto you, preaching to you to be converted from these vain things to the living God" (Acts, 14, 14). Similar sentiments fill the heart of a confessor in the face of penitents who are restrained by a false shame to confess their sins to him. If they only remembered that he is mortal like themselves, they would not allow such insane feelings to overcome them.

A very successful man, when asked how he accounted for his prosperity, replied that from the beginning of his career he fought the feeling of fear that started within him. He said he conquered it by reflecting in this way: "If I am afraid, the man I am dealing with is just as much afraid as I am. So I may as well take heart and go ahead." Every sincere and contrite penitent, assailed by a nonsensical fear of the priest, should say similarly: "If I am afraid, he is as much afraid as I am; hence I am not going to worry, but will proceed to tell my sins with humility and candor." In reality, the priest is usually more addicted to fear because of his personal sins than is the penitent kneeling before him.

Disappointed and Shocked

But say the priest would in reality think hard of you in consequence of your shameful revelation, and would even let you feel that he has been terribly disappointed and shocked by what you told him, what of it? Would not the sufferance of this humiliation and smart be perhaps the best atonement you could offer for your sins? And might it not conduce powerfully towards your improvement in real virtue and solid holiness to know that you are reputed as a sinner or, in other words, rated according to your real merits? You should then leave the confessional even as the apostles left the council—though in a different sense, of course—“rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the Name of Jesus” (Acts, 5, 41). After all, nothing pleases a truly contrite sinner more than the opportunity to punish himself by utter self-depreciation and self-humiliation in the confessional for the love of God.

It happened during a laymen's retreat, in which young, medium and old men of various professions were gathered in a college building for the refreshment and reinvigoration of their souls. The retreat master had put them into a serious and self-introspective mood preparatory to the retreat confession. Everyone was much in earnest.

Insomnia

One of the most conspicuous figures of the crowd, a man of deep faith, strength of character and integrity of life, for some reason could not lure sleep that night. Growing tired of lying awake in bed, he arose, dressed, and paced quietly up and down his little room. When he wearied of this small and narrow space he went out into the corridor to saunter noiselessly to and fro to while the heavy hours away. It was about two o'clock in the morning. To his surprise a door of another room was partly open. A light was burning in the room and the occupant was writing very intently. The stroller wondered what the scribe was so bent on writing at that hour of the night. It occurred to him, that the man was writing his sins in view of the retreat confession he planned to make: the very thing he himself was earnestly thinking about, namely his sins, as he was striding along the corridor.

The next day, in the recreation period, the night prowler related what he had observed, and the writing penitent became the victim of much good-natured bantering by the crowd. Someone asked him: "What if you lose that paper of sins, and another finds it?" The aforesaid perambulator answered this question himself rather frankly and comfortingly, saying: "I suppose everyone of us could pick it up and use it for himself in the confessional."

Who Will "First Cast a Stone"?

There is considerable truth and good sense in this answer. If all Catholics would but reflect, that human nature is pretty much alike in all men and women, and that human failings are common to all, they would not find it such a formidable task to confess their sins humbly and contritely to the priest; in a word, to admit that they are human. Again, the same reflection would keep us all from becoming proud, snobbish and pharisaical; for no matter who we are, or what we pretend to be, or pose as being, we could usually afford to take the list of our neighbor's sins and use it as our own in humble, candid and sorrowful self-revelation. Our Lord brought this home to us in the words: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone" (John, 8, 7).

In a fierce persecution of the children of God in olden times the prophet Elias was much depressed. He called on the Lord, saying: "Lord, they have slain Thy prophets . . . and I am left alone" (Rom., 11, 3). God answered him, saying: "I have reserved to Myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed their knees to Baal" (ib., 4). Elias, then, thought he was the only loyal Jew left in his country: whereas God assured him there were seven thousand like him. Inversely, many a sinner approaches the confessional with a trepidation of heart, fearing he is the only one so wicked and sin-laden: whereas not only God, but also the con-

fessor knows that there are seven thousand like him.

Everyone Has His Own

Years ago, in one of our Cincinnati churches, when the young men were going in large crowds to confession to celebrate their anniversary the following day with a general Communion, one of them was confessing to the priest in a loud voice. The priest cautioned the penitent not to speak so loud, for the waiting crowd outside could hear everything he was saying. "It does not matter," replied the young man, "they, too, have each their amount of sins." Such a noisy and public confession is ordinarily not advisable; but the animus accompanying it in the youth bespoke a degree of good sense. And the assertion he made may well be pondered to their advantage, and in the interest of the peace of their soul, by those who have an exaggerated and morbid fear of the sincere and sorrowful recital of their sins in quiet and sacred privacy to a priest who is bound to absolute secrecy and inviolable religious trust. If at night you went all alone into the cemetery, and in a subdued whisper confessed your sins to or before one of the silent monuments there, they would be just as much in danger of being revealed as they are now when you reveal them to the representative of God in the hallowed precincts of the confessional.

CHAPTER VII.

Scrupulosity

PART ONE

"My soul is troubled exceedingly: but Thou, O Lord, how long? Turn to me, O Lord, and deliver my soul: O save me for Thy mercy's sake" (Ps. 6, 4, 5).

IN THE previous chapter I referred to one class of Catholics for whom confession is hard, yea impossible, namely those who are living in mortal sin and are minded to continue in it. The other class of Catholics for whom confession is hard is made up of those persons who are commonly known as "scrupulous". With regard to confession a scrupulous person is one who, relatively to the commission and forgiveness of sins, doubts without reason, fears without ground, and is worried without cause. The condition of mind of a scrupulous person, in as far as he or she is scrupulous, is irrational, abnormal and morbid. It is a pathological state spiritually, and not seldom also physically.

A Spiritual Hypochondriac

What a hypochondriac is in reference to bodily health, the scrupulous person is in respect to the

health of the soul. The hypochondriac often imagines he is ill when he is not, or exaggerates the indisposition he actually has. The thought of his distemper, real or imaginary, actual or impending, is his one all-absorbing occupation. He can hardly read or hear anyone speak of an illness or of the symptoms of it without fearing he has or is likely to get it. He is afraid to partake of the most wholesome factors of health because of an unreasonable fear lest they may be harmful to him. He patronizes doctors after doctors, and uses medicines upon medicines.

The more the doctors tell the patient that he is not so sick as he believes he is, and that his worry about being sick is in reality his only trouble, the more he is convinced they do not understand his case, and are unreliable when they prescribe for its cure. Somehow he is satisfied that his case is quite unique and baffles the apprehension of everyone save himself. For this reason he is inclined to distrust the best experts and doctors of medicine, and to handle his condition himself as best he knows how, yet not without frequenting and plaguing others with his fatuous worries and idle queries: idle for the simple reason that he puts them without any serious will to comply with the directions he receives. As a result he remains miserable: a hapless victim of his sickly imaginations and morbid fears. The condition and conduct of the

scrupulous person in religious matters are a counterpart to those of the hypochondriac in hygienic matters.

Normal Scrupulosity

In the spiritual life we distinguish a normal and an abnormal scrupulosity. The normal brand is not uncommon. Almost all God-loving persons who enter upon an intense campaign of combating sin, and fostering a fervent love of God and an ardent striving after virtue and perfection in themselves are prone at some time or other to become excessively timid, delicate and sensitive of conscience, so that they sense sin where there is none, and fear that sin still clings to them after it has long vanished. Exaggeration is human, and as little foreign to piety and religion as to any other phase of human endeavor to which the soul addicts itself with devotion and vigor. Moreover, conscience and the spiritual life in general are mysterious and elusive fields of recognition. Even the keenest and most sober mind can not always and readily say what is and what is not sinful, and decide in a given case whether, and how much, the soul yielded to a certain temptation; and, if it sinned, whether it is guilty of venial or mortal sin.

It is therefore quite ordinary for religious people to pass through a period of spiritual doubt, perplexity, perturbation and fear, when they are

much at sea regarding their relation to God and salvation; when they seem to have lost their moorings, and to be at the mercy of clouds above, of cliffs beneath, and storms all about them. No doubt this condition is also providential inasmuch as God usually loves to lead His chosen ones to the Promised Land through some kind of a desert, in which they are made to feel their own helplessness and the need of His continuous guidance and support.

Seasoned by Scrupulosity

Then, too, those persons will be better qualified and more seasoned to serve as spiritual guides to others in their turn, who have learned from their own trying experiences in the spiritual life to be as considerate and sympathetic towards others as they are humble and distrustful of themselves. Some of the greatest spiritual guides in the history of the Church endured a more or less protracted siege of scrupulosity themselves before they were ready and mature to serve as reliable directors to others.

This normal scrupulosity, however, as a rule does not last overly long, since it yields to sensible treatment and wise direction. It can not, for any length of time, withstand the power of good common sense, reinforced by virtue and grace. Every sensible person sooner or later perceives the excess and exaggeration of scrupulosity, and

begins to dread and recoil from the obsession and the attacks of it. The soul that really loves God trusts spontaneously in His infinite goodness, mercy and love, and as by a natural and supernatural intuition shrinks from an attitude that openly militates against the consoling belief in these divine attributes.

For knowing with absolute certainty that God is infinitely good and that there are no bounds to His mercy, the soul perforce recognizes that a scrupulous conduct is altogether out of harmony with the assumption of God's goodness, and must therefore be definitely and ultimately repudiated. Yet there are times when a mild form of scrupulosity adheres to persons of sound judgment and healthy piety throughout life.

Abnormal Scrupulosity

When scrupulosity is intense and chronic, and refuses to yield to treatment, it is called abnormal. It is then nothing less than a form of insanity or aberration of the mind. It is a serious affliction and full of dangers to the health of body and soul. It is often, if not always, due to or associated with some organic or constitutional derangement directly affecting the nervous system, and indirectly influencing the imagination and the mind. There are cases of scrupulosity which have been brought on by a one-sided religious education, which stressed the obligations and ignored the

helps and consolations of religion; which emphasized the threats, but minimized the promises of God; which accentuated the punishments of sin and vice, whilst it belittled the rewards of virtue and penance.

Persons have become scrupulous through association with scrupulous persons. This spiritual malady is contagious and easily affects those who are predisposed to it by temperament or a certain nervous condition. Others have contracted scrupulosity through injudicious reading of a religious or spiritual nature. Even as healthy persons, through the continuous perusal of books of medicine or hygiene, can be beguiled into believing they are corporally ill: so through ill-advised reading of religious books good people can be gradually but falsely persuaded that they are spiritually sick.

Scrupulosity Varies

A person may be very scrupulous regarding one or the other point of religious life, yet sane and sober, or even lax, regarding other features of it. No one, of course, could be highly scrupulous regarding the entire periphery of the moral and religious life without being or soon becoming hopelessly insane. It may be the operation of the law of compensation that scrupulous people not infrequently indemnify themselves by yielding to a certain latitude in one sphere of morality

for being unjustly narrowed and confined by their scrupulosity in another.

It is needless to add that not only in religious and moral, but also in other matters people are often found to be scrupulous. But in these instances we call them nervous or neurasthenics. Some persons can never satisfy themselves, for instance, that they have properly set the alarm before they retire. They are ever so long at satisfying themselves on this head, not without being aware of the folly and silliness of their conduct. Others have the same trouble with regard to the sealing, addressing or mailing of letters, or the turning off the gas, locking the doors, or looking under the bed or in the wardrobes and alcoves for burglars, etc.

Divers Fears

The scruples of some persons obstinately revolve about the sinfulness of their thoughts, imaginations and desires. Others fear before every action lest what they want to do may be a sin. Others are always troubled about the worthiness of their confessions, the sincerity and completeness of their recital of sins, or the genuineness and sufficiency of their sorrow for sins. They always feel they should repeat their past confessions; and the more they repeat them, the less satisfied they are with them.

No two cases of scrupulosity are entirely alike in their individual manifestations. But all cases of scrupulosity resemble one another in being in conflict with sound reason and good sense, and in being hostile to the peace of mind and the welfare of both soul and body. Hence they should be detected, the sooner the better, and neither time nor pains should be spared in effecting a definite and lasting cure, if possible; or, at least, a substantial and welcome relief, which will render life livable to the victims of scruples.

How Is Scrupulosity Known?

By what symptoms is scrupulosity revealed? An acute case of scruples is easily and readily diagnosed, bordering as it does on, if not actually involving insanity. If the case is not acute but real nevertheless, it can hardly escape the observation of experts, say confessors, if it is submitted to them directly or indirectly, since all cases of scrupulosity follow certain devious ways of reasoning, or dwell on certain irrelevant points with excessive emphasis.

The scrupulous person himself can diagnose his case by a certain timidity, vacillation and insecurity that attend all his moral judgments in a given line of conduct. He has an intuition, too, that the fear which continually obsesses him is immoderate and opposed to good sense; hence it creates a feeling of irritation, vexation and an

unsatisfied condition of mind. Furthermore, the intensity of his scruples varies considerably in degree. At times it almost overwhelms him, while at other seasons, maybe an hour or two later, it vanishes almost entirely, things remaining the same objectively the while. From this he justly draws the inference that it is not the objective truth of the thing that worries him, but rather his subjective disposition or, preferably, indisposition. Finally, if he were asked to give advice to someone else laboring under the same doubts and misgivings, he would not hesitate a moment to bid him to dispel and ignore them. By these and similar reflections scrupulous persons can usually come to a definite knowledge of the morbidity of their state of mind.

Odd Mannerisms

Even in his external deportment the man who is a victim of scruples variously reveals his malady. He is usually nervous, restless and fidgety. He makes the impression of being ill at ease and haunted by some obsession. He is inclined to bite his finger-nails, catch his breath, sigh audibly, or perform some similar mannerism. Every now and then he is overheard talking to himself. He is often absent-minded, and not at all concentrated on the work he is engaged in.

The scrupulous person battles openly against his secret temptations, shaking his head, closing

his eyes, convulsively clinching his fingers, etc., whereby he contributes more to the merriment than the edification of those who observe him. His bodily health soon suffers sympathetically from the illness of his mind. He looks emaciated, haggard and dyspeptic, inspiring pity for his distress, not unmixed with indignation at his folly, in those that know him.

Snow-Blind

Traveling through the northwest lately, I met a man who told me for seeing snow so much and so long he got snow-blind, meaning his vision was affected so he could not discern any objects readily and correctly for the time being. For concentrating too long and too much on their doubts of conscience in a narrow and one-sided manner scrupulous persons become as it were sin-blind; for looking at what they consider sins or near sins all the time their mental vision grows defective or distorted and quite unreliable. Happy they, if they at least recognize their malady, and allow themselves to be guided by trustworthy directors.

Usually to gage any object correctly one must see it at the proper perspective or distance, and in a just setting. If you are too close to it, you get an incomplete or incorrect perception of it. With regard to doubts of conscience this holds good also. If you gaze upon them too closely, without the proper regard for whatever else should be

considered in connection with them, for instance your habitual love of God and hatred of sin, you will likely appraise them wrongly and be unduly excited by them. And this very excitement in its turn will increase the false apprehension. Give the doubt a chance to get at a proper distance from you in the way of time. Do not dwell on it right away as soon as it occurs to you. Wait a while until your mind is good and ready to size it up soberly and justly. And give it the once-over, as they call it, but once, and decide the matter categorically and ultimately. If you keep on revolving the doubt endlessly in your mind, your reason will soon grow dizzy, helpless and hopeless.

It Afflicts All Classes

Scrupulosity is not restricted to age or sex. Men are found to be afflicted with it as well as women; boys and young men suffer from it as well as girls and young ladies. Married people are not immune from it; neither are the unmarried. Secular people are harassed by scrupulosity; priests and nuns are equally troubled by it. Some are visited by the malady in the beginning of their life for God and their soul; others experience attacks of it only later on; others again experience it intermittently, at shorter or longer intervals. Some are scrupulous with regard to themselves, but are excellent guides of others;

whereas some are as little able to guide others as themselves.

As an indication of character, scrupulosity is rather favorable than unfavorable to its victim. It proves him to be at least aiming at righteousness and conscientiousness. If he did not in general design to please God and save his soul he would not worry about the sinfulness of this or that act as he does. Nor is scrupulosity of itself a reflection upon one's mentality. It can and often does cohabit with the brightest intelligence and keenest judgment. St. Alphonsus Ligouri, a great saint of God, a Doctor of the Church, whose works on moral theology are standard and authoritative books in this delicate field of knowledge, in the last two years of his life fell a pitiful victim to intense and painful scrupulosity. Cardinal Franzelin, one of the greatest theologians of the last century, was violently troubled with scruples towards the end of his days. Famous theologians of our own day, whose books are splendid guides to directors of souls, especially with reference to the cure of scruples, have been and are said to be desperately scrupulous themselves.

Scrupulosity and Holiness

These and many similar facts prove, that of itself a scrupulous condition may easily coexist with great holiness as well as with eminent and

precise learning and knowledge. As has already been mentioned, it is, outside of a special disposition of Providence, a pathological condition affecting the nervous system and whatever is in connection with or dependent upon it. As it is no discredit for a person to be afflicted with another ailment, neuritis or erysipelas, for example, so is it neither a reflection upon a person to be afflicted with scrupulosity. Yet as the sufferers from other diseases do what they can to be delivered from them, so the scrupulous person will do what is in his power to be cured of his malady. The more he delays applying the cure, and the more he humors his disease by unduly deferring to the suggestions or the fears it engenders, the more virulent and the less curable it becomes.

A pious but scrupulous woman, who had the habit of going to holy Communion frequently, was a great trial to the priests who administered the sacraments to her. Not only did she insist on going to confession again and again needlessly and most unseasonably, but even at the holy table, as the priest would offer her the sacred host, she would every now and then yield to some scruple and shake her head to tell the priest she preferred not to receive.

A Troubled Priest

Years ago in Europe I heard of a learned, devout and exemplary priest who was deplorably troubled

with scruples. After going to confession repeatedly in preparation for holy Mass he would finally begin to vest for the sacred oblation. After he had the amice on, he would be worried again, and he would put it off in order to go to confession once more. The next time he might get as far as the cincture, when another scruple would harry him and induce him to go back to confession. Finally he proceeded unto the chasuble when a new scruple assailed him and forced him to confess anew. At the fourth attempt he usually succeeded in approaching the altar to celebrate the august sacrifice. This was quite a frequent procedure with this unhappy man of God.

A More Troubled Priest

I was also told the sad story of a friar priest who, in spite of his talents and piety, was very crest-fallen and despondent. He asked everyone he met to pray for his intention. One of his confreres told me later that the poor man was desperately scrupulous, so much so that he had not dared to say holy Mass for eleven years, and he was not saying Mass then. The reason was, he feared lest, whilst he was being ordained a priest, he did not have the required intention or will to become a priest. Of course it was on the face of it the merest scruple and he should not have attended to it in any way. Yet being troubled by it, he submitted his case of conscience to his

superior, who told him apodictically to ignore it once for all. He aimed to be obedient and said Mass for some time. But the scruple bobbed up again and harassed him anew to a degree that he was afraid to say holy Mass, since he was not certain he was a duly ordained priest.

His superior, not being able to prevail upon him to celebrate the august sacrifice, endeavored to quiet his scrupulous conscience by appealing the case to the bishop who had performed the ordination. The bishop at once bade the priest to be satisfied he was validly ordained and to resume once more the celebration of holy Mass with an easy conscience. Yet the unfortunate man could not be induced to override his scruple which had by this time taken complete possession of his imagination and reason. He said it was impossible for him to say Mass in his state of mind.

More Scruples

The bishop, then, being a very considerate and sympathetic man, proposed another solution. He suggested that, since the Father was so much in doubt as to his proper intention while being ordained, he, the bishop, was willing to repeat the ordination conditionally, so that if the first ceremony was not valid, the second would surely be. But here the scrupulous man balked again, saying, he could hardly vouch that his doubt was sufficient to justify the conditional repe-

tition of a sacrament which may be conferred but once, since it impresses an indelible mark or character upon the soul. In consequence, instead of saying holy Mass as he should have done, the poor priest paced somberly up and down the corridor of his convent, begging those whom he met they should please pray to God for him. It was twenty-seven years ago that I visited the monastery of which he was a member. I am wondering if he ever said holy Mass again.

I mention these extreme cases of scrupulosity affecting good and conscientious people in order to make several pertinent and useful observations. First of all, we can not say that any of these persons were guilty of personal sin with all their scrupulosity. They may have been entirely irresponsible and guiltless in the process. It may have been an unaccountable malady with them, due to certain physical causes or defects in which they had no fault. A wise and virtuous person is never quick in condemning anyone who is scrupulous and blaming him or her for the affliction or the magnitude of it.

Heart Trouble and Vertigo

Fairness, justice and charity are often violated by such summary and ready condemnation. As well may you blame a patient suffering from heart trouble or vertigo for his disease, without a previous deliberate appraisal of the facts in

the case. The golden rule is to be observed towards scrupulous persons as well as others, viz.: Do unto others as you would want to be done by, were the relations reversed. It has not been of rare occurrence for such as had no sympathy whatever for scrupulous persons to be punished by a severe visitation of scruples themselves. Whether guilty or not, scrupulous persons, being unfortunate and miserable, deserve compassion, indulgence and sympathetic, though wise, treatment from everyone.

In the second place, we learn from the aforesaid cases to what unreasonable and insane conduct in the practice of religion unchecked scrupulosity is likely to lead men and women who in all other things are quite sensible and sober. No doubt a number of my readers, who are scrupulous themselves, could not restrain a feeling of pity and laughter as they read the eccentricities cited above. Yet their own scrupulous antics, whatever they are, may be in their way and degree just as silly and ridiculous and, if it is not soon curbed, their case of scruples may sooner or later run into similar religious excess and madness.

An Itch of the Skin

It is possible, however, speaking under correction and with all charity, that one or the other, or all three of the parties mentioned above were

more or less to blame for the violence of their case. Had they resisted the first attack of scruples; or had they yielded prompt and final obedience to their confessor and spiritual director the first time he diagnosed their condition as one of scrupulosity, and apprised them of the conduct they were to observe against it: maybe they would have been definitely cured of their malady, or at any rate it would have never grown to so uncontrollable a virulence. Scruples are known to be like an itch of the skin: the more you yield to the inclination of scratching it and directly relieving it, the worse and more teasing it becomes. The best way to treat it is to ignore it as much as possible, and to endure negatively what can not be entirely ignored. For a scrupulous person to combat his scruples positively and by direct attack is as useless as it is fatuous. The only method with which he will succeed is, under prudent spiritual direction, to ignore his scruples all he can, and patiently, but negatively, to endure what he can not cure. Alligators and other vicious animals, it is said, as a rule do not bother those who let them in peace. Similarly scruples would not create nearly so much havoc in souls if their victims would let them severely alone, and not stir them up unnecessarily; and, when they come unbidden, if they ignored them even as they ignore temptations against the faith or the holy virtue.

A Tremendous Waste

Another thing we learn from the cases referred to above, is the amount of valuable time, good energy and splendid talents that are often idly and purposelessly consumed through scruples. Many a fine mind is hopelessly clouded, many a brilliant talent is miserably paralyzed, many an enterprising spirit is definitely dampened, and many a promising life is woefully cramped through the disturbing, benumbing and deadening influence of scruples that are not checked betimes.

Scrupulous persons do not only waste their own precious time, strength and patience with their fatuities, but they also make heavy and trying demands upon the time, strength and patience of others. And they are ordinarily prone to abuse the goodness and readiness of those who are most patient and considerate with them. They can be, and often are, quite inconsiderate, impertinent and shameless in the attention they require and frequently demand with ill-timed and ill-mannered insistency from their confessors, superiors, teachers or other advisers. Of course, their malady may partially or totally excuse them; yet they are trying to their friends, patrons and benefactors none the less, and if they have a sense of gratitude they will do all they can to put an end to, or at least relieve unto some degree of sobriety, their obnoxious malady by complying closely with the directions given them.

A Handicap to Piety

Furthermore, it is evident that a scrupulous conduct, once it is extreme and generally noticeable as in the aforesaid cases, does not make for the glory of religion or the edification of others. If anything, it renders piety disagreeable and uninviting to the superficial observers who can not distinguish an exaggerated and absurd piety from the true and healthy brand. I remember the remark made to me years ago by a good young man who had a scrupulous associate. Referring to his companion's silly behavior he said: "If that is piety, I am going to beware of it." He knew it was not piety, but a travesty of piety; hence he was not diverted from his pursuit of true piety. While sensible Catholics know how to make allowances for the puerile vagaries and ridiculous eccentricities of scrupulous persons, lukewarm Catholics, non-Catholics and unbelievers often use these excrescences as occasions for raillery and derision of everything holy and sacred.

The worst and by far the most dangerous feature of unrestrained scrupulosity is the tendency of its victim to flop over into the opposite extreme of gross laxity of conduct. Nature itself revolts against a long and flagrant violation of common sense, such as is involved in abnormal scrupulosity. Moreover, the human will, the mind, the imagination and the nervous system, all of which are laid under the heaviest contributions by undue

scrupulosity, have a certain capacity beyond which they may not be strained with impunity. And when so strained they take revenge and indemnify themselves by assuming more liberty and indulging in more relaxation than they are entitled to. The result is, the scrupulous person, instinctively feeling the absurdity of his conduct, often gives up the struggle in despair, throws off all restraint, follows the line of least resistance, and ere long yields to gross immorality, or rank infidelity, or both: all in consequence of having abused, misused, or failed to use his reason and good sense while he still had possession of them.

A Frightful Example

Martin Luther is perhaps the saddest and most flagrant example of this degeneracy of a scrupulous person. He is said to have been, as a friar and a priest, abnormally scrupulous. In place of being bent upon curing himself by humble obedience and docility to his confessor and superior, he aimed to adjust his conscience by his own false lights and elusive judgment. In consequence his conscience only became more and more involved, befuddled and bemuddled, until his mind was quite unbalanced, his nervous system was in revolt, and in sheer despair he yielded to all the worldly, fleshly and satanic impulses that seized and gradually enthralled him completely. I know that this extreme case is exceptional, but

in a greater or lesser degree this fatal reaction to scrupulosity is not rare. Examples of one time over-timid and over-conscientious persons gradually becoming over-liberal and over-broadminded in their religious or moral conduct are seen everywhere to the distress of their friends and well-wishers who can not but deplore the great and not altogether happy change they notice in them.

The Golden Mean

“Deep calleth on deep” (Ps. 41, 8): one excess causes another. The golden mean is the best and safest road to travel in all things, piety and religion not excepted. In fact, if good, sound common sense is valuable, serviceable and necessary anywhere, it is in the grand and all-important relation of the creature to His Creator. “Doth God pervert judgment, or doth the Almighty overthrow that which is just?” (Job, 8, 3.) “The Lord loveth judgment, and will not forsake His saints: they shall be preserved forever” (Ps. 36, 28). “I have been young, and now am old; and I have not seen the just forsaken” (ib., 25).

These and similar texts offer much comfort to the many God-loving scrupulous souls, whose spiritual malady is in no way due to any fault of theirs, in its incipency, continuance or progress. It is an affliction pure and simple, severe and dire at times, over which they have as little control as patients have over cancer, tuberculosis or

other physical diseases that may attach to them. Certainly, as long as a scrupulous person can convince himself that he can be cured, and behaves accordingly, he seems to be in a way of a cure. But there are certain phases and stages of scrupulosity which cling to their victim with such tenacity, in spite of his best will and the wisest treatment, that the only thing left for him to do is to be patiently resigned to his lot and to look to heaven for a release from his tribulation in God's own time and manner. In the meantime he can be sure "that the Lord will not forsake His saints"; and that "they that sow in tears, shall reap in joy" (Ps. 125, 5).

Veritable Saints

There are quite a number of such scrupulous persons who are veritable saints. In His unsearchable providence God used and uses scrupulosity to make them saints and advance them in holiness, even as He uses other temptations and spiritual trials, or corporal illnesses as factors of sanctity in His chosen ones. He permits the keenest and deepest minds, as well as the most dynamic and energetic characters, to be annoyed by humiliating and embarrassing scruples in order to keep and promote them in humility and distrust of themselves. Scrupulous persons have occasions upon occasions to practice heroic self-effacement and self-hatred. Their foolish scruples

often force them to make self-revelations to their confessors that seem to them, the penitents, to be not only grossly shameful and highly painful exposures of moral delinquency and vileness, but also to contain indications of a weak and imbecile mind.

The Confessor Makes Allowance

Much as every wise confessor will discount their stories and make a generous allowance for their mental troubles, the sacrifice of the penitents is no less arduous and confusing, and their willingness and readiness in making it are no less heroic and savoring of genuine sanctity. If they did not love God in a very high degree, and if they were not eager to save their souls at any cost, they would never submit to such ordeals of self-confusion and, as it appears to them in their morbid state, of moral self-annihilation. And, unless their case of scruples appears grotesque and extravagant on the surface, and consequently begets revulsion, their over-conscientiousness frequently contains an element of edification for their surroundings, and helps to keep others from treating moral and religious subjects lightly and frivolously in word or deed. Finally, though scrupulous persons usually have a morbid fear of death, and are goaded in nursing their scruples by the very dread of death, if they persevere to the end in virtue and grace in spite of their

scruples, as most of them do with the help of God, their earthly reward will as a rule consist in the blessing of a very easy, sweet and happy death in the Lord. All their apparently frightful scruples will vanish like mist in the light of dawning eternity. "The Lord will not forsake His saints."

"Away With Sadness and Scruples"

But when all is said in defense and on behalf of inculpable scrupulosity affecting just and saintly souls, we can not but recall the words of the Imitation of Christ, that "few people improve by sickness". This is as true of the psychic illness of scrupulosity as it is of bodily illness. Only few persons, comparatively, grow spiritually better through scruples; by far the majority who are afflicted with them grow worse. It is therefore the part of wisdom to forestall scruples when they threaten to come; and to banish them the sooner the better, when they come.

Comforting as it is for a scrupulous person to hope that all his scruples will leave him in death, it would be immensely more comforting and helpful, if his scruples would leave him in life, as far as it depends on him to dismiss them. His motto should be the saying of St. Joseph of Cupertino: "Away with sadness and scruples. I will not have them in my house."

CHAPTER VIII.

Scrupulosity

PART TWO

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am afflicted . . . My life is wasted with grief, and my years in sighs . . . I am become a reproach . . . to my neighbors, and a fear to my acquaintance” (Ps. 30, 10-12).

A PIOUS Christian gentleman laughingly relates of himself that, when he was a boy, he had a tinge of scrupulosity. His confessor was very patient. The young penitent was rather long and detailed in his weekly confession. When he finally finished, and the priest was saying the prayer previous to the words of absolution, the boy would interrupt him, saying: “Father, you better throw in another bad thought.” As he thinks of it now, the man can not help smiling about it. The boy’s naive caution, however, rather pregnantly characterizes the failing or weakness of scrupulous people. They are always afraid they have not “thrown in” sufficient material into their confession, when in reality they usually exceed by throwing in too much material that is irrelevant, unnecessary and uncalled for.

Neurasthenic Penitents

Another penitent tells a story of how he was cured of a bad and vicious case of scrupulosity all of a sudden and rather unexpectedly. His confessor was a pious and saintly man whose chief asset was an unfailing patience, an imperturbable sweetness and an abiding sympathy with all his penitents, particularly the timid and scrupulous ones. For this reason his confessional was habitually crowded with more or less neurasthenic votaries. But no matter when they came, or how often, and with what interminable and meaningless tales, he heard them to the end without the least sign of impatience or any disturbance of his angelic equanimity and suavity.

“Please Go To Hell!”

The gentleman of the story admits having put this equanimity to a frequent and severe test by his weird and endless scruples. Still he never dreaded to approach the confessional of this holy priest, assured as he was of a warm and fatherly welcome. One day, however, being unusually nervous, and being worried about the genuineness of his act of sorrow, when he was through with his recital of sin, he asked his confessor to allow him some time to make a good act of contrition. There was a line of penitents waiting outside to go to confession; yet the good priest waited several moments to give his penitent

ample room to satisfy himself about his act of contrition. When he felt he had given him plenty of time, he started to bestow absolution. But the penitent interrupted him, pleading: "Father, please wait a few minutes more." Every time the priest attempted to impart the absolution, the penitent interrupted him with the same silly plea. Finally, for once the man of God did seem to lose his patience, and when his penitent said again: "Father, please wait a few minutes more," the priest blurted out and said: "Son, please go to hell!" And with that he arose from the confessional and left abruptly, without further ceremony.

It Brought Him to His Senses

The penitent was shocked, of course. But this shock was a blessing in disguise. It brought him to his senses. It did him more good than all the previous longanimity and gentleness of his sainted confessor. It opened his eyes to the fact that, instead of using the sacred tribunal as a means of going to heaven, he was running a risk by his perversion of judgment and good sense, to turn it into a path towards hell. He saw into the futility and absurdity of his conduct, and he was never bothered with another scruple thereafter. He continued to go to confession to the priest who cured him in so striking a manner, feeling that the confessor was inspired by God

to say just what he said to him on that memorable occasion. And he never ceased to thank him heartily for having been to him not only a real father, but also a stern yet loving physician. Whatever may be the historic value of this story, the scrupulous persons who read it ought to derive from it valuable hints for their own conduct and cure.

The God of Peace

Effectively to forestall and successfully to eliminate scrupulosity, it will behove us to keep in mind certain incontestable truths of our holy faith. Above all, our Lord "is not the God of dissension, but of peace" (1 Cor., 14, 33). He was no sooner born into this world when He had His first messengers, the angels, to announce as the purpose of His coming "peace to men of good will" (Luke, 2, 14).

Scrupulous persons, whatever may be the condition of their nerves, imagination and mind, usually have a good will; hence they are entitled to peace. That this peace was to be conveyed especially through the sacrament of holy penance Jesus indicated in the plainest manner when He started the institution of it by saying: "Peace be to you! . . . And He said to them again: Peace be to you!" (John, 20, 19, 21.)

When Jesus had forgiven Mary Magdalen her sins He said to the woman: "Go in peace" (Luke, 7, 50). When in addition to this we recall the

words of the Bible telling us that "the Lord is sweet to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps. 144, 9), we can not but get the impression that scrupulosity objectively militates against the very attributes which God is most fond of manifesting on this earth. As was said in a previous chapter, it is God's predominant urge—speaking with all reverence—to display His mercy. Whoever, then, yields wilfully to scrupulosity contravenes the exhibition of God's favorite trait and perforce incurs His displeasure.

The Golden Rule

Jesus enjoined upon us the golden rule of conduct when He said: "All things, therefore, whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them" (Matt., 7, 12). If someone was eager to serve you in the uprightness and love of his heart, would you expect him to go about it in the painfully anxious and ridiculously punctilious way of a scrupulous person? Would you not consider it a reflection upon your goodness of heart and fairness of mind, if one served you with so much perturbation of spirit and timidity of soul? How, then, can you believe that this manner of service is going to please God? "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father from heaven give the good Spirit to them that ask Him?" (Luke, 11, 13.)

A Queer Prayer

In an ancient cemetery of England there is said to be a quaint and a rather irreverent inscription on a grave-slab reading after this fashion:

“O Lord, be good and considerate to me, Thy poor servant, Martin Edinbrook, even as I would be good and considerate to Thee, if I were the Lord, and Thou wert Martin Edinbrook.”

This prayer almost savors of blasphemy, yet the sentiment it contains might profitably be dwelt on by scrupulous people, and give them a more just and fair appraisal of God's love and mercy. And maybe the above naive prayer would displease God less than the fears, suspicions and trepidations of scrupulous persons.

“God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor., 9, 7). He exhorts us, saying: “In every gift show a cheerful countenance, and sanctify thy tithes with joy” (Ecclus., 35, 11). Whoever has observed scrupulous people preparing for or going to confession knows that there is little if any trace of cheerfulness and joy in their countenance, but a great deal of worry, trouble and distress. Nothing takes all the delight and alacrity out of a life of piety and virtue so quickly and so completely as scrupulosity. Herein lies its chief menace.

The Heart Needs Joy

To succeed in any human endeavor the heart must enjoy it and the spirit delight in it. Some

element of animation and buoyancy has to support the spirit of enterprise and energy without which no work of value can be achieved. On the long run continuous depression and despondency are paralyzing to the most active mind, and deadening to the most willing heart. This explains why scrupulosity is so heavy a drag on the soul in its flight towards perfection, and so constant a brake on it in its race for holiness. In the clearest words Jesus tells all His followers: "My yoke is sweet and my burden light" (Matt., 11, 30). Scrupulosity, however, renders the yoke of Christ, notably the most merciful and tender portion of this yoke, confession, intensely bitter; and it renders the burden of Christ unbearably heavy. It can therefore not be pleasing to Christ, since it nullifies His most consoling and heartening promise. To it apply the words of St. Peter: "Why tempt you God, to put a yoke upon the necks of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" (Acts, 15, 10.)

If the scrupulous person, who worries day and night about his confession, wears himself out before he approaches the sacred tribunal, trembles while he is in it, and pines away with despondency after he has left it, were asked the first question in the catechism: "Why has God created you?" and if he replied in keeping with his method of living, he would have to answer: "God has created me to go to confession." This is practically his only

life's worry, and his one concern. The thing sounds ridiculous, but if they are candid many scrupulous people will admit that in reality all their energy and attention are absorbed by foolish and purposeless scruples mediately or immediately relating to confession.

The Honeymoon Ends

They tell a story of a young couple who seemed to be ideal marriage mates. The young wife was very attractive and highly gifted in every way so as to make a perfect spouse. Her husband appreciated her according to her real value, and he in his turn was worthy of her beyond question. The honeymoon had not advanced far, however, when a cloud appeared to dim the brightness of their joy. In order to show a keen interest in their home, and to ingratiate herself more with her husband, the young wife of a sudden got the idea that she wanted to keep house on a perfect economical basis, and in keeping with a close and exact budget. She soon proceeded so far in this hobby that it became a veritable mania with her. She began to count the lentils which she used in the soup for the evening dinner, in order to know exactly how much was needed for the table. After she counted the lentils she feared one or the other escaped her reckoning, and she counted them over. The oftener she counted them the more confused she became as to their number,

until she was quite bewildered and beside herself for worry about the matter which, trivial and laughable as it was in itself, seemed big and most important in her eyes.

She Was Counting the Lentils

The result was that soon, when her husband came home from work in the evening, instead of finding a nice warm and ready dinner welcoming him, he was met by an anxious look on the face of his young wife who was absorbed in counting lentils. He asked her the purpose of such a puerile occupation on her part. She explained that she was intent on keeping a close eye on the economical feature of housekeeping: hence her eagerness to know precisely how many lentils they consumed day for day. When she said this the husband could as little believe his ears, as it had been hard for him to believe his eyes when he saw her upon entering the room. He apprehended the situation philosophically, and in a tone of the most assuring love and sympathy he told her that he did not expect such close housekeeping from her; that he had been very much pleased by the way she kept house before, when she paid no attention to the single lentils, but looked after a good hot dinner in general; that it would be a pity to have her splendid talent for cooking expended on so insignificant an exercise; that he would be more than willing to provide her with

so much income that she would not need to be concerned about such little details. Kissing her with fondness and warmth, he said: "Now be a good girl, Martha; and leave the counting of the lentils to me while I eat them. You see that we get some dinner."

The Meal Was Not Ready

The poor woman was too far gone in her hallucination to admit of correction. The next day and every day the loving and hard-working husband, returning from the day's toil, found his wife counting lentils, while the house was untidy and no meal prepared. Not being able to put up with this situation any longer, he grew angry and displeased; and ere long the sweet marital relation ended in mutual coldness and separation: all because his wife insisted on counting the lentils. If she had avoided this folly, or stopped it no sooner she became aware of it, or at least when her husband bade her discontinue it, how happy she and he would have been!

This story is silly in the extreme, I know. Yet it graphically illustrates the fatuousness of conduct displayed by many excellent persons who are becoming or have already become scrupulous. Their relation of friendship and union with Jesus were wondrously sweet, until they foolishly began to count lentils in their spiritual life; in other words, to pay attention to vain fears and empty

misgivings, instead of attending to the substantial progress of the soul in solid virtue and genuine sanctity. Their own good sense told them at the very start that it was ridiculous for them to be detained and concerned about such vapid imaginations, and soon they were bidden by their confessors to ignore them rigidly. But they kept on pursuing and nursing them, until their whole life, and their fine energy, and their marvelous talents were consumed in no higher and more profitable work than counting puny and elusive lentils, or pursuing empty and unmeaning figments of a morbid mentality.

“O Thou of Little Faith”

The mistake underlying scrupulosity is the over-emphasizing of little accessories at the expense of the substance of conduct. Had the woman in the story attended to the meal at large instead of concentrating on the correct number of lentils, she would have fared nicely. Our Savior brings out this truth very forcibly in the words which He addressed to St. Peter: “O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?” (Matt., 14, 31.) St. Peter made the mistake of focusing his attention on one thing only, and that was very secondary and quite negligible in the entire episode, namely the strong wind—“seeing the wind strong he was afraid”—; he paid no attention to our Lord’s power, and His express invitation

to come to Him upon the waters, which infinitely overtowered the strength of the wind; in consequence "he began to sink".

No Sense of Proportion

Scrupulous people err or fail in the same manner. They center all their attention upon some relatively unimportant or altogether irrelevant circumstance of their behavior, until it acquires a greatly exaggerated and disproportionate importance in their eyes. Meanwhile they lose sight of the substance of their conduct and the great elements affecting it: their general and abiding conscientiousness; their real and fervent love of God; their burning desire to save their soul at any cost; and especially the infinite mercy, sweetness, goodness and longanimity of God: and as a result their judgment is one-sided, colored, completely unfair and unreliable. Instead of being a straight and just mirror to reflect the true state of their soul and conscience, their sickly mind has degenerated into being a concave mirror for the attributes of God in their behalf and for the good traits of their behavior, extenuating and belittling them unto impotency; and into a convex mirror for their doubts, fears and suspicions, magnifying them unto grotesque and horrid dimensions. Their one aim must be in humble docility to their confessor, and in boundless trust in God, to return once more and for-

ever to the one reliable and God-given mirror of common sense and sound reason, illumined by faith and assisted by grace.

A Travesty of the Sacrament

Although their intentions are usually the best, scrupulous people, in going to confession after their own manner, unwittingly make a travesty of the holy sacrament of penance and tend to render it ridiculous. This in addition to the fact that they in reality pervert what was designed to be the greatest and sweetest manifestation of God's mercy into an institution of insupportable rigor and mental torture. Not along ago I was told of a missionary who was explaining how some Catholics, for staying away from confession an abnormally long time, forget entirely how to go to confession and, in consequence, when they go again, they often behave in an absurd and irreverent manner. The story he told greatly entertained and amused the good Catholic ladies who crowded the church, one of them going so far as to say, so that those who were about her could hear it: "If he tells another like that one, I'll pass out." The story seemed rather far-fetched and overdrawn to me, but it occurs to me now, that it will serve to illustrate my point with regard to scrupulosity. The reader will bear in mind that it is all a mere fiction, or a sort of parable invented to drive home a wholesome lesson.

An Unusual Story

A priest was hearing confessions—such is the story—on a crowded night, when many penitents were in line to be shriven. He finished the penitent to his right and closed the slide. When he opened the slide at his left, he heard a rustling noise but no voice. Waiting a moment he inquired, saying: “Well, ar you there?” A voice replied: “I am up here, r’ather.” The lady had so far forgotten how to go to confession that she had climbed up on the arm rest, and was kneeling on it not without some difficulty. The priest said: “If you come down on the ground, we may be able to proceed.”

After the lady dismounted from her eminence and was kneeling on the kneeling bench, the following conversation started between the priest and her: “When was your last confession?” “Father, it has been so long, I can’t tell you how long it was.” “Was it a year ago?” “O Father, dear, sail on; it was longer than that.” “Was it five years ago?” “Keep on sailing, Father.” “Was it ten years ago?” “You must still sail some more, Father.” “Was it twenty years ago?” “You have not sailed enough yet, Father.” “Was it twenty-five years ago?” “Anchor there, Father.”

“Sail On, Dear Lady”

Not without considerable patient questioning on the part of the priest the lady finally succeeded

in making a tolerable confession, but her disposition of heart, as to true sorrow and purpose of amendment, seemed to be more than questionable. So when, after she finished telling all her sins, she asked the priest: "Father, do you think I am going to heaven?" her confessor, to call her attention to her lack of contrition, said calmly: "Sail on, dear lady." "Am I going to purgatory?" she then queried. He retorted: "Keep on sailing, lady." "Am I going to hell?" she asked tremulously: "Anchor there, good lady," the priest replied sternly.

"Up In the Air"

This was the story as it was reported to me by one who heard it in a church not far from Cincinnati, in the winter of 1927. My readers will agree that the lady of the story was considerably "up in the air", according to the popular phrase, and that her manner did not help to bring into prominence the sanctity and dignity of the sacrament, and the reverence due it. Scrupulous people, without being so culpable in the matter—although at times they may be equally culpable, owing to their stubbornness and indocility—frequently render the holy sacrament of penance similarly ridiculous through their manner before, in, and after its reception. For one thing, they are usually much "up in the air" spiritually and mentally, and far removed from the firm and

reliable ground of common sense and reasonable piety. They harass and annoy and try the patience of their confessor as much, if not more than the aforesaid lady. Instead of going to heaven, or of achieving peace of mind after their confession, to which all their efforts and good will seem to entitle them, they usually glide along into the purgatory of greater mental trouble, worry and unrest, and not seldom anchor in a state of spiritual horror and desperation that is akin to hell. These are hard words, but real facts bear out the truth of them in many instances.

The Anchor Is Lifted

If they have any sense of and concern for their own welfare, therefore, scrupulous people will follow the example of the lady in the story, and in all hurry, in pursuance of their confessor's direction, come off their airy, flimsy and ridiculous perch, which is nothing else than their morbid imagination, and they will abide by all the counsels and advices their confessor will give them. If they do this, it will not be long and their soul's anchor, which may have held them to fierce, but uncalled-for mental torture and perturbation for a long time, will be lifted, and they will sail into the sweet and delicious harbor of peace of mind, joy of heart, and refreshment of spirit. This applies to every form of scrupulosity with reference to confession, whether it regards the

examination of conscience, the recital of sin, the sufficiency of contrition, the purpose of amendment, or the performance of the penance.

It would require a book in itself to mention in detail all the various phases and degrees of scrupulosity, and their individual treatment. There are scrupulous people who are mainly troubled about their past confessions; others are uneasy about their present confessions; others again about both. Some are much perplexed regarding their consent to temptations to impurity; others as to temptations against the faith; others as to those against charity; some as to all these together; and in addition they have the most horrid thoughts of blasphemy against God, holy persons, things and places. Unmentionable and shocking as these pictures and thoughts often are, the poor victims of them not only fear they have consented at least in some measure, but they feel obligated to confess them, not in general, but in all their horrid and unnatural details: an ordeal from which they naturally, instinctively and very justly shrink with horror. Some scrupulous people are always worried whether they may perform or omit a certain action without sin; others are troubled lest they are giving scandal in whatever they do or say; others worry much about their duty of fraternal correction day in, day out.

In a previous book of mine, "Youth's Pathfinder," a notice of which may be found on

the rear page of this volume, I have rather elaborately given my views regarding scrupulosity inasmuch as it refers to the sins of impurity, and the way of treating it. I beg to refer my readers to its pages, notably to the fifth chapter of the book. What I there say respecting scrupulosity will be found applicable in a manner, too, to temptations against faith and similar spiritual vexations.

“Lord, That I May See”

In the following chapter I shall endeavor to give some useful observations and practical hints on scrupulosity in general. By way of a preliminary caution I want to warn my scrupulous readers, that they must above all trust in prayer for their main help. They realize that they are blind, as far as their own spiritual guidance is concerned. And being blind, they ask Jesus to cure them. They must not expect the cure to be instantaneous in every instance, but rather gradual, after the manner of the cure of the blind man of Bethsaida. Jesus, “taking the blind man by the hand, He led him out of town; and spitting upon his eyes, laying His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And looking up, he said: I see men, as it were trees, walking. After that again He laid His hands upon his eyes, and he began to see, and was restored, so that he saw all things clearly” (Mark, 8, 23-25).

CHAPTER IX.

Scrupulosity

PART THREE

"Fear is not in charity: but perfect charity casteth out fear, because fear hath pain; and he that feareth is not perfect in charity" (1 John, 4, 13).

WHILE confession, or the thought of its obligation, no doubt often causes and almost always accentuates scrupulosity in Catholics, it must be owned that there are also not a few non-Catholics who are scrupulous. Some time ago I was told of a non-Catholic young lady who had always been warned by her parents not to go to shows, since it was sinful to attend a show. Her girl friends prevailed upon her to attend what they considered a good, decent and unobjectionable show. After she attended it she was stricken with such severe and biting remorse, that she could not sleep for nights for sheer worry about what she had done.

If confession has a tendency to beget and increase scrupulosity in some penitents, it also offers the best remedy for and corrective of scrupulosity to those who frequent the sacred tribunal properly and regularly. I shall now aim to give

some good advice to such scrupulous persons as are on the one hand well-meaning and in earnest about saving their souls, and on the other desirous of being cured of their noisome spiritual disease, so they can serve the Lord with their whole heart, and their whole soul, and their whole mind (Matt., 22, 37), as the Lord bids them do, instead of wasting the best efforts of their heart, soul and mind in gnawing, benumbing and aimless scruples.

“God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

The scrupulous person must above all be convinced, that the only one who can cure him, next to God, is he himself. This is very positively a case of “God helps those who help themselves”. Not even the most saintly, wise and learned confessor in the world can help the scrupulous person one particle, unless the scrupulous person begins by helping himself. He does this, first, by admitting to himself unconditionally that in his state, in the light of his past experience, he is altogether unfit to be his own guide in the spiritual life. Consequently he submits unreservedly to the guidance of his confessor and spiritual leader, whose directions he complies with readily, conscientiously and trustingly, without challenging, questioning or doubting their justice, fairness or prudence in the least. To acquire and maintain this attitude he resigns

his own judgment, distrusts his own lights, and ignores his own feelings, fears, misgivings and suspicions entirely and mercilessly, without any regard to the false warnings of his conscience, and the morbid stirrings of his emotional nature, which his past experience has again and again demonstrated to be sheer mirages leading into the bogs of uncertainty and the quagmire of despondency.

Obedience Is the Road to Victory

In the confessional every penitent, but particularly the scrupulous penitent, must remember and abide by the words of Jesus to His apostles: "He that heareth you, heareth Me" (Luke, 10, 16). By obeying his confessor as he would obey Jesus Himself, if He spoke to him in person, he will overcome his perplexity of mind and achieve peace of soul. According to St. Philip Neri, who cured many a scrupulous person, an obedient soul can not be lost, and a disobedient soul can not be saved. And St. Bernard says the devil need not tempt those who refuse obedience and are guided, or misguided, by their own false lights and fears, for they play the devil's role for themselves.

The Mystery of Nerves

There is also a physiological aspect of scruples that deserves to be considered. The mind operates through the body. The nerves seem to be

the binding link between body and soul. Whenever one yields to a scruple—this is true of all other volitions, too, of course—there is created or fostered in the corresponding nerve center a physiological demand for the repetition of the gratification accorded it through the consent to the scruple. It makes a stronger call than before for the same satisfaction, and the oftener it is gratified, the more tyrannical and unrelenting is its demand. Far from being healed, therefore, scruples are merely aggravated, at times unto a fatal and tragic stage, by being humored. Their only cure lies in their being resisted and ignored. Thereby, as through inanition, the sickly nerve center that begets the scruples in a given case is gradually tempered and restored to a normal and healthy condition.

False Prophets

In a very pronounced manner scruples are frequently among those false prophets who according to the warning of our Savior, try to seduce even the elect, if possible, by saying falsely: "Lo, here is Christ, or there" (Matt., 24, 23). The sensible thing to do is to answer them saying: "Christ is right here, in my humble and docile obedience to my God-given confessor and director. If I am going to find Christ at all, I shall find Him here. I will not seek Him elsewhere." In this connection comes to mind the warning of

Jesus: "Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt., 18, 3, 4).

So Shall the Last Be First

The more childlike and trustful an attitude the scrupulous penitent takes and keeps towards his confessor, the brighter are his prospects of soon entering a high place in the heaven of spiritual joy and exultation. With regard to Him the other words of Jesus will be verified: "So shall the last be first" (Matt., 20, 16). For reducing himself to the lowliness of a mere child in the direction of his soul, and for humbly admitting that he is totally incapable of guiding himself, our Lord rewards him by granting him intense spiritual delights and exhilarating heavenly consolations. This reward will be in pursuance of the other beautiful promise of Jesus, saying: "Learn of Me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls. For My yoke is sweet and My burden is light" (Matt., 11, 29, 30).

Once the scrupulous person has gained this disposition of childlike and unqualified docility to his confessor, the confessor can and will be of great help to him. It will be wise, as a rule, if he

adheres to the same confessor as much and as long as possible, confides in him fully, and complies with his direction faithfully. This process, if persistently pursued, will either cure his case of scrupulosity entirely, or it will at least relieve it very materially. Nor need or should he ever shrink from obeying his confessor blindly. He must always, when his scruples begin to stir or balk against this blind obedience, hear the Lord whispering to him the words of the Bible: "Obedience is better than sacrifices" (1 Kings, 15, 22). "An obedient man shall speak of victory" (Prov., 21, 28). Contrariwise, the disobedient scrupulous person will be able to register nothing but defeats as far as the acquisition of interior peace and advancement in the love of God is concerned.

The Priest Was Cured

I was once told of a scrupulous priest who had contracted the unwholesome and annoying practice of repeating the words of consecration at Mass frequently and, of course, altogether needlessly. An older priest called his attention to this rather serious defect, and told him that the only way to overcome it was to resolve firmly, once for all, in the future to say the consecrating words attentively, but once only, no matter how he would feel about it for the moment. If he adhered to this advice he would be cured. He followed it, and he was and to this day is cured of his ob-

noxious habit. The same advice, if loyally and consistently carried out as to other scruples, would effect either a permanent cure or, anyway, a substantial relief in every instance.

In the gospel we read that when the apostles saw Jesus "walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying: It is an apparition. And they cried out for fear. And immediately Jesus spoke to them saying: Be of good heart: It is I; be not afraid" (Matt., 14, 27). The disciples thought they saw an apparition when they saw Jesus himself. Scrupulous people often see mere phantasms of their sickly mind which they mistake for messages of God; while they frequently treat as sheer phantasms the real manifestations of God, namely the directions of their confessors, through whom Jesus says to them, too: "Be of good heart: It is I; be not afraid."

"Trust Rather Too Much Than Too Little"

In the history of the Church it will go hard to find a more eagerly sought and theologically trustworthy spiritual director than St. Francis de Sales. Even today his spiritual books are unsurpassed in the light and balm they provide for timid and meticulous souls. Still in his youth Francis was for a while terribly tormented by scruples and thoughts of black despair. But his virtue, faith and good sense never forsook him. When in the torturing apprehensions that as-

sailed him there seemed to be absolutely no prospect of salvation for him, he lovingly said: "Well, if I shall not be able to love God in the future life, I will love Him all I can in the present life." This was but another way of saying: "Since, as far as I am aware, I have no other aim but to love and please God, I am satisfied that these scruples and fears of mine, whatever they may refer to, and however they may now appear to me, are meaningless and groundless: hence they will not shake my confidence in the goodness and mercy of God in my behalf." He subjected himself unrestrainedly to the guidance of his confessor, and ere long he was totally cured of his dire affliction of soul, and ever after he enjoyed ineffable peace of mind. He became by and by a great leader and healer of scrupulous and despondent souls himself, and in his direction of them he insisted on the observance of this maxim: "If we have to trust either too much or too little in God: it is better and safer we trust too much rather than too little."

Solve Your Doubts Yourself

This is a wise maxim, altogether in keeping with what has been said in previous chapters of our Lord's ruling urge: the display of His mercy to all well-meaning and God-loving persons. While the sensible scrupulous person is closely intent on obeying his confessor in all things, there

will be many occasions and incidents regarding which he has not the time or opportunity to consult his confessor regarding his conduct in an individual case, or when he is doubting just how to apply the direction given him by his confessor. In these and similar instances he will do well and act both wisely and virtuously if he follows the aforesaid maxim of St. Francis. All pious and holy persons do the same. Not one of them but is often vexed and anxious as to what he should or may do or omit in a particular instance. He usually solves his doubts himself and acts on his own lights, in keeping with the quoted maxim.

God gave us each our own individual reason, judgment and conscience, so we might ordinarily regulate our own conduct according to well-tried principles, without being obligated to refer the single cases to others. Scrupulous persons, who are fearful lest they must always be submitting their cases to others before they act, no matter how often they have been told they are justified in deciding for themselves what they may or may not do, should keep this truth of sound Catholic moral doctrine and good common sense well in mind, and observe it courageously in practice. In the ordinary transactions of life, in which all good people follow their own best judgment, they are fully qualified to judge for themselves and to act without fear of sin according to their judgment.

Five Rules of Conduct

For scrupulous persons, who have not degenerated into a conduct of gross laxity, but are minded to do what is right as far as they recognize it, theologians agree on the following principles: 1. Whatever you have been told by your confessor to do, you will not sin in doing just as he told you to do it, regardless of how you feel about it, or how differently it seems to you than to him, or whatever fears of sin may start within you for doing it. 2. Whenever you are in doubt if you are obligated to something or not, you can take it for certain that you are not obligated. 3. If, before you perform or omit an act, you are doubting if it is sinful for you or not, you can assume as certain that it is not sinful, and you can do it without any dread of sin whatever. 4. If, after you have done or omitted something, or suffered any kind of temptation, you are in doubt if it was sinful for you, you can always judge, with every assurance, that it was not sinful and you need pay no further attention to the matter. 5. If you doubt whether your confession or confessions have been invalid, or whether you have to repeat, or confess for the first time, certain actions of your life as sins, you are under no obligations whatever to repeat those confessions or to confess those actions; and you will do better by not mentioning them at all than by scrupulously yielding to the itch of manifesting or repeating them.

Be Stubborn and Consistent

Of course, if one has grown very lax in his conduct, and quite indifferent to the admission of mortal sins as a matter of course, these rules will not all apply to him. But such a one will hardly be reading this book. For all timid and conscientious souls, who really want to cling to God and salvation, they apply fully and unconditionally, and can not be reduced to practice too positively, apodictically and peremptorily. And to reduce them into practice in this manner the aforesaid maxim of St. Francis will often prove wonderfully helpful and opportune. But it must be consistently and even stubbornly adhered to by the scrupulous person who wants to derive the full benefit from it for his and others' peace, comfort and joy. We can scarcely doubt that St. Francis became a more effective and substantial guide for souls for having been tormented by scruples and torturing despair himself. Maybe your own cure will mean that you, too, are destined some day to be a soothing and comforting guide to many another soul in spiritual perturbation and distress.

Temptation and Sin

There is a world of difference between temptation and sin. A million temptations of themselves do not constitute a single sin. A temptation may be ever so violent and insistent, and endure ever so long a time, without the admission of even a

venial sin on the part of the person who is tempted. The close and consistent observance of this all-important distinction will readily forestall and definitely banish many an idle fear and silly scruple.

The reaction of a normal mind, in its conscious reflection, is altogether different in the case of a temptation to which it gave full consent, and consequently sinned, than it is in the case of a temptation in which it did not acquiesce. In the former case a reasonable doubt is not possible to a conscientious mind. As long as there is such a doubt, therefore, there was evidently no sin committed; for no amount, and no vehemence, and no continuance of temptations of themselves hint at, let alone establish, ever so slight a sin.

To produce sin all possible and imaginable temptations alone do not avail. Only deliberate consent causes sin. And whenever a sin-loathing mind gives this voluntary consent to sin, it is no longer dubious but certain of having yielded. If it is still dubious, it obviously did not sin; and the matter should be peremptorily and finally dismissed once for all. The pious and learned Gerson says that when a fierce monster looks into a mirror, the mirror is not sullied. So, too, if the devil of impurity or blasphemy glares into the mirror of your soul without your consent, your soul suffers no harm whatever.

The Noisome Pebble

The word "scruple" is derived from the Latin word "scrupulus", or pebble. If one has a pebble in his shoe, he not only experiences annoyance and pain, but he is also hindered in his walk. If he does not remove the pebble, he may become altogether and permanently lame. The etymology is well chosen, for in the spiritual life a scruple acts exactly thus. The remedy against the spiritual pebble should be as quickly sought and decisively applied as it is in the case of a pebble in the shoe.

As soon as you feel this pebble you stop to locate it, and when you find it you thrust it from you in anger and forever. You do not dilly-dally with it, or treat it softly and indulgently, wondering if you could not somehow adjust it so you could keep it in your shoe and walk in spite of it. No; you can not and will not entertain the thought of tolerating it.

This is the only way of dealing with a spiritual scruple. As soon as you recognize it, or your attention is called to it by your spiritual director, throw it from you with indignation, once and forever. If you begin to coddle it, fondle it and flirt with it, it will ingrain itself more and more in your conscience, and it may easily end by rendering your soul permanently lame in its march up the mountain of virtue, perfection, holiness and salvation.

The Gordian Knot

The scrupulous person who is bent on being cured of his malady, has to deal with his scruples as Alexander the Great is said to have dealt with the Gordian Knot. It was hopelessly snarled and tangled. The oracle had declared whoever would unravel it would become the conqueror of the world. When in his march of victories Alexander visited the temple of the oracle, he was shown the knot by the priests who told him of the prediction connected with its untying. Alexander asked if the gods had prescribed the method of its solution. He was told that no method was prescribed. He then took his sword and cut the knot in twain, and forthwith proceeded to become the master of the then known civilized world. Had he attempted laboriously to loosen the knot with his fingers, as others before him had endeavored to do, he would have failed even as they failed.

A Mess of Scruples

Many a scruple or mess of scruples in God-loving persons is just like that Gordian Knot. If they wanted to solve it by their own ratiocination or logic, or knowledge of theology, or psychology, or personal introspection or examination of conscience, they would never come to a satisfactory solution of it; on the contrary the knot of their scruples would only get more and more in-

volved and complicated, much to their discouragement, despondency and despair. But if they attack the knot by the decisive and final blow of their humble and unconditional compliance with the direction of their confessor, they will soon be the conquerors of the entire world or periphery of their spiritual life. Where before everything was dark, foggy, gloomy and threatening, now everything will be bright, hopeful, cheerful and promising.

The Devil's Pious Decoy

St. Vincent de Paul was also a great connoisseur of spirituality and sanctity. He was a most charitable man, and had the warmest and tenderest sympathy for everyone who was afflicted in the body or the soul. Towards scrupulous persons he was sympathy itself, yet not unaligned with prudent and at times rigid guidance. He wanted his penitents to give no quarter to scruples, and to yield a prompt and uncompromising obedience to their confessors. He would not endure the scrupulous penitent who declined or even hesitated to obey him blindly and unequivocally. Those who obeyed him were not long in being cured or for a great part relieved of their trouble. He used to say: "When the devil sees that he can not ensnare a soul into his meshes in any other way, he tries scrupulosity as his last resource. And, alas, with this he sometimes succeeds."

Saints recognize the devil at once, no matter how much and how variously he tries to disguise himself in the form of an angel of light, and uses a semblance of piety and conscientiousness as a decoy for unwary souls.

“I Am the Way”

No one has done, is doing, or ever will do so much to discountenance any leaning towards or connivance with scrupulosity in connection with confession as our Lord Himself. In addition to His manner of instituting the sacrament of penance, in which He seemed to be at pains to discourage and dispel everything that savored of scrupulosity, Jesus definitely frowned upon and condemned scrupulosity by His own method of forgiving sins. Since He knew He would institute the sacrament of forgiving sins later, He was aware that His own method in dealing with sinners would naturally serve as a model for His disciples in their forgiveness of sins, and as a source of consolation and comfort for those who would seek the forgiveness of their sins at the hands of His apostles and their successors.

How, then, did Jesus forgive sins? Does His conduct allow, let alone foster, any entertainment of or indulgence in scruples regarding the pardon of the penitent's sins? I know that we have to make allowance for the fact, that Jesus, being God, did not insist on a personal recital of indi-

vidual sins being made to Him, since He had a clear knowledge of these sins, and fully knew the case He was passing judgment on. Yet aside from this, even as to the recital of sin the manner of Jesus begets great trust and confidence, and in no way nurtures the practice of meticulously exaggerating the obligation of this recital.

Christ's Manner Towards Sinners

Jesus was very lenient in His demands for sorrow for sin, duly associated with the purpose of amendment, without which He did not and could not forgive a single sin. He thereby clearly indicated His mind regarding the necessary recital of personal sins to be made to the priest, since this recital is not nearly so important and essential as is the sorrow for sin. In other words, if Jesus demanded so little with reference to what is primary in the sacrament of penance, He indirectly but obviously manifested His displeasure that undue stress should be laid upon what is secondary. How, then, did Jesus act in the forgiveness of sins?

In each and every instance recorded by the Bible our Savior's conduct was uniformly that of unbounded kindness, gentleness, considerateness and sympathy. He never insisted on much ceremony or formality, let alone the observance of painful or impossible minutiae. His pardon was always informal, ready, warm and generous.

To the man sick of the palsy Jesus said: "Be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven thee" (Matt., 9, 2). The man had himself brought to Jesus, not to have his sins forgiven, but to be cured of the palsy. Yet Jesus started by forgiving him his sins, in view of his faith and love, and He told him to be of good heart. There would have been ever so much room for scruples there had the man been inclined to encourage them. He might have wondered if, since he had not even asked to have his sins forgiven, they were in reality forgiven. But he had too much faith in our Lord as to doubt His words, and he was at once "of good heart" about the remission of his sins. This pleased Jesus very much, for He wants His disciples to have limitless confidence in His goodness. He rewarded the sick man by curing him of his bodily illness also. Scrupulous people, therefore, who are at pains for hours and hours to prepare themselves to receive pardon for their sins, surely have every reason to trust the words of the priest, the delegate of Jesus, in the confessional, when by absolving them he bids them to "be of good heart" regarding all their past sins.

"Go, And Now Sin No More"

One day the scribes and Pharisees brought to our Lord a woman taken in adultery. They asked Jesus what punishment was to be meted

out to her. "Jesus . . . said to her: Woman, . . . hath no man condemned thee? Who said: No man, Lord. And Jesus said: Neither will I condemn thee. Go, and now sin no more" (John, 8, 10, 11). The woman had not come to Jesus of her own accord. She was dragged before Him against her will. And yet without further ceremony He forgave her the terrible crime she was guilty of. In the light of this conduct of our Lord the worry and commotion of mind scrupulous people yield to, in spite of all their efforts to obtain pardon from Jesus through confession, look very groundless and most unwelcome to Him, the kind, gentle and most forgiving Savior.

"Go In Peace"

To Mary Magdalen, the public sinner, who had committed and seduced others to countless sins, Jesus said: "Thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . Go in peace" (Luke, 7, 48, 50). She did not confess a single sin. She did not even admit by word of mouth that she was a sinner. She merely cuddled in faith and love near the feet of Jesus and wept over her sins. She might have forfeited the peace Jesus bestowed upon her by wondering if He really knew who she was and what she had done; and if, consequently, His words of forgiveness applied to her at all. But her love and trust in Him did not permit her to entertain so irreverent and

unloving a thought. She yielded unconditionally to all the peace that in pursuance of His declaration flooded her soul. Every well-meaning scrupulous person, after all the ceremony he subjects himself to in view of procuring pardon for his sins, has reason to yield just as unreservedly to the words of Jesus, spoken to him through his confessor: "Go in peace. Thy sins are forgiven thee."

"The Lord Looked On Peter"

St. Peter had denied Jesus repeatedly with oaths and imprecations. "And the Lord turning looked on Peter. . . . And Peter going out, wept bitterly" (Luke, 22, 61, 62). Peter had not asked outright to be forgiven. But in his remorse for his sin he lingered about hoping Jesus would give him some recognition that He still loved him. And the glance our Lord cast at him contained a declaration of perfect pardon and undiminished love, moving Peter to the bitterest and, at the same time, the sweetest tears of the most heartfelt contrition. If Jesus pardoned the crime of apostasy so readily and lovingly in the interest of Peter, because of his wholehearted antecedent attachment, He is no less willing to forgive scrupulous persons, who after all aim but to please Him, whatever sins they may have done.

“This Day Thou Shalt Be With Me in Paradise”

To the thief on the cross who, after blaspheming and insulting our Lord, turned to Him in faith and sorrow, saying: “Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom” (Luke, 23, 42), Jesus said forthwith: “Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise” (ib., 43). Jesus seemed to be waiting most eagerly for this great sinner to give some indication of sorrow and a desire for forgiveness. No sooner he produced it, He showered all His pardon upon him. If Jesus exacts so little ceremony from one whose entire life was sin, crime and iniquity, and who a few moments previous had derided and hooted Him, why should He be supposed to expect the well-nigh impossible from those godly and timid souls who have spent and are spending their days in trying to love, serve and please Him however they can?

In forgiving sins our Savior purposely singled out great and striking cases of sins in order to inspire all sincere penitents with comfort and hope, and forestall anything like petty fears and nonsensical misgivings regarding the acquisition of forgiveness on the part of those who were desirous of it. Moreover Jesus, once He forgave sins, never referred to them again. They were forgiven, and that was the end of it. This was a clear and strong hint to over-timid souls not to

dwell distrustfully and gloomily on their forgiven sins, or the sins covered directly or indirectly by their previous confessions.

One of our good Fathers in days passed used to be not a little annoyed by a Sister Sacristan who was abnormally scrupulous. Her malady centered mainly about the little white specks she chanced to notice on the paten of the chalice when putting away the sacred vessels after Mass. They were only little atoms of lint from the pall or other dust. But she always feared they might be particles of the sacred host. Repeatedly she had summoned the Father to remove them. He assured her that he was very conscientious in cleaning the paten and gleaning from it all possible sacred particles at the Mass; hence she need and should not worry about mere atoms of dust. But once more her trouble got the best of her. One day, perceiving a new white speck, she was so afraid it might be a sacred particle that she placed two lighted wax candles aside of it, and called the Father to attend to it. When he arrived, he was sure she was adoring as our Lord what was only a particle of dust. He blew it away unceremoniously, saying: "Sister, please do not worship dust in place of our Lord." This cured her. If only all scrupulous people could summarily blow away the meaningless figments of their imagination instead of seeing in them the will of God, their religion would be reasonable and their life happy.

In concluding this chapter we shall do well to reflect again on the look of love and pardon which Jesus cast at Peter. It reminds us of the words of the Bible: "Turn ye to Me, saith the Lord of hosts: and I will turn to you" (Zach., 1, 3). As soon as the sinner turns ever so little to God with a sentiment of sorrow and love, God turns towards the sinner with His boundless mercy and ineffable forgiveness. And who can be said to be turning to God for pardon, if not the scrupulous person that subjects himself to the most trying ordeal and the most mortifying practices of self-humiliation to turn to God and have God to turn to him?

The upshot of our entire consideration on scrupulosity will be, I fondly hope, that my readers, especially those who are, or have a tendency to become, scrupulous, take to heart the words of St. Peter who says: "Be you humbled therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in the time of visitation: casting all your care upon Him, for He hath care of you. Be sober and watch: because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion (in the form of hounding and haunting scruples), goeth about seeking whom he may devour. Whom resist ye, strong in faith... But the God of all grace, Who hath called us unto His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little, will Himself perfect you, and confirm you, and establish you. To Him be glory and empire for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter, 5, 6-11).

CHAPTER X.

What Sins Must the Sinner Confess ?

“Be not ashamed to confess thy sins”
(Ecclus., 4, 31).

THE German poet Heine was a man of great poetic genius, but his moral life was not commendable. He admitted that his conduct was blamable on many serious counts, but he soothed his conscience saying: “I know that God will forgive me, for that is His business.” The tone of this sentence, spoken by a man of more or less licentious habits, is not the most reverent; nor does it seem altogether untinged with a vestige of presumption on God’s mercy. Yet the truth it expresses is one of the most consoling doctrines of our holy faith. And the sentence, as it is, provided it is uttered with becoming sincerity and reverence, is as good a life’s motto as any true penitent can adopt. He can not repeat too frequently or apply too emphatically and thoroughly to his own case the words: “I know that God will forgive me, for that is His business.”

God's Business

When He was a boy of twelve years, our Lord declared publicly: "Did you not know, that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke, 2, 49.) If as man He was so intent on His Father's business, it is evident that as God He will be no less bent on being about His business of forgiving sins to those who are eager for pardon. That forgiving sins is His specialty, or His peculiar or preferred business here on earth, God has proclaimed in every tone and manner in the Bible. Jesus says unequivocally: "Go then and learn what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. For I am not come to call the just, but sinners" (Matt., 9, 13).

In view of this every God-loving person, whatever fears or worries may try to annoy and disquiet him, will say, after the fashion of the little boy who, being asked upon his return from Sunday school what the lesson was about, replied: "It was all about: 'The Lord is my shepherd, and I should worry.'" In this one phrase alone is contained a complete and lasting cure for undue timidity on behalf of all those who adopt it and apply it constantly and uncompromisingly.

Needless Worries

Although confession proper, or the recital of sins, is by far not the most important element of the sacrament of penance, it nevertheless causes

or increases most of the worries attendant upon its reception. And these worries oftener attach to the optional than to the necessary material of confession. In other words, more scruples refer to things that need not be said in confession than to those that must be said. In this chapter I shall attempt to give the readers a clear and distinct knowledge of what sins must be confessed, and also of what sins may but need not be confessed, in order to obtain their forgiveness from God.

The Council of Trent teaches that the penitent must tell the priest the mortal sins of which he is conscious. A mortal sin is a wilful transgression of a grievous law of God. Three things are required to constitute a mortal sin. The law that is transgressed must be grievous, important, or considerable. If the law merely refers to something light, of small significance, or of little moment, its transgression is not a mortal sin. The second requirement to make up mortal sin is, the perpetrator of it, at the time of its commission, must be fully aware that what he is doing or omitting is for him, now and here, a mortal sin. He is in no doubt about this, nor is he uncertain about it: no; he is positive that his act or omission is for him under the circumstances a grievous sin. Certainly, if one sins grievously by way of habit, is lax, in other words, his reflection upon the grievousness of his sin need not in every new

instance be actual and formal, since he habitually knows he is sinning mortally.

Not Taken by Surprise

The third condition necessary to bring about mortal sin is the full and unequivocal consent of the will to what the mind knows to be a mortal sin. There is not a question of being involuntarily carried away by a sudden impulse over which one for the moment has no control of reason and will; nor of being taken by surprise without a sufficient chance of mature deliberation over one's act; nor is there any hesitancy there, nor a degree of resistance: but consciously, deliberately and voluntarily the will yields to what the mind clearly recognizes to be a mortal sin.

If any of these three conditions is missing, altogether or in part, the act or omission is either no sin at all, or it is at most a venial sin. But when they all three concur: the importance of the law that is being transgressed; the distinct knowledge of the gravity of the sin on the part of the perpetrator; and his full and unqualified consent to the transgression: then there is committed a mortal sin. Whoever is conscious of being guilty of such a sin must confess it if he desires forgiveness of it.

Conscious of Sin

When may one be said to be conscious of sin? To be conscious means to be sure. The mind in

its judgment of the fact, unpleasant as the admission may be to the subject of it, is fully at rest that such a sin was committed. It is in no way in doubt about it, as little, relatively, as you could be in doubt whether you are now reading this book. Your mental apprehension of your act of reading is so positive that a doubt regarding it is quite impossible. Similar to this mental experience is or must be the judgment of the commission of a mortal sin, if the person is conscious of having committed the sin. If the mind is in a state of uncertainty; if there is any reasonable or sensible doubt in the matter at all: the mind is not conscious of the sin, and consequently this case is not comprised by the afore-said doctrine of the Council of Trent, and the sin or act, which is the object of the doubt, need not be mentioned in confession.

Various Doubts

A person can have various doubts with reference to his admission or non-admission of mortal sin. He may doubt if he was ever guilty of the supposedly sinful act or neglect at all. It seems to him he may have been; again he has reasons to believe the contrary. In this case he can not be said to be conscious of sin, and obligated to confess it. If he is sure of the fact, or of the actual occurrence of the act or omission, he may doubt whether it was for him a mortal

sin according to the explanation of mortal sin given above. If he has any warranted doubt respecting any of the three conditions: the importance of the law; the sufficiency of his knowledge of the gravity of the sin at the time of its perpetration; or the fullness of his consent to what he knew was a mortal sin: he is again not conscious of sin, so as to be obliged to confess it. If he is sure that what he did or omitted was for him a mortal sin, he may still be in doubt if he has already confessed it or not. In a way it seems to him, not without some probability, that he has confessed it; again he is not sure that he confessed it. Or he knows that he confessed it, but he is not certain that he confessed it duly or sufficiently. In neither case is he conscious of sin, or obliged to confess it. A stringent law, as is that of confession, must be interpreted with a jealous eye to human liberty which is in possession of its right to independence unless the contrary is definitely and unquestionably established.

“Be Sober”

Only what is clearly, decisively and unmistakably of obligation must be taught or considered to be so. Nor does this infringe at all upon the rights of God or the sanctity of the sacrament. St. Peter bids us to “be sober”, or to use common sense and be guided by sound reason. This holds in no sphere more than in religion; and in no

feature of religion more than with regard to the sacrament of penance. Its reception makes a special demand upon virtuous sobriety in the penitents, and this sobriety should contain a very strong mixture of childlike trust in the mercy of God.

Even with all this allowance, which is quite generally owned by theologians to be well supported by the teaching of the Church, and which is practically conceded to their penitents by the most holy and enlightened confessors, the confession of sin is a heavy and poignant burden to human nature. And to such as make it unnecessarily harder still, either for themselves or others, apply the words of Jesus: "Woe to you, . . . because you load men with burdens which they can not bear" (Luke, 11, 46).

Guides of Souls

Great and very successful leaders of souls, for instance St. Philip Neri, St. Francis de Sales, St. John Baptist Vianney and countless others, in their dealings with sinners used to say, if not in words, at least in their conduct: "It hath seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay no further burdens upon you than these *necessary things*" (Acts, 15, 28). This method no doubt accounted to a large extent for their phenomenal success in saving souls and leading them to the highest perfection and astounding saint-

hood. Whatever penitent observes the necessary things in the reception of the holy sacrament is not far removed from salvation and the author of salvation, Jesus Christ.

Since the penitent is obliged to confess only the mortal sins of which he is conscious, it follows that he need not make any mention whatever of doubtful sins. In this category are included confessions and Communions that are doubtful as to their validity or worthiness. Nor must the penitent confess venial sins; and if he mentions them, he does not have to tell their number or circumstances. The Church, as has been said, assumes that in every good confession are included, without any direct or indirect allusion to them, all the inculpably forgotten sins, all the doubtful sins, all the venial sins, and all the doubtful receptions of confession, Communion and other sacraments of the past. The penitent, therefore, does not need to mention or refer to all or some of these points at all, when he goes to confession, no matter how worried or anxious he may feel about them. Well-meaning scrupulous persons may and should adhere to these principles rigidly and fearlessly.

Lax Sinners

Here again a caution must be registered, however, relative to lax sinners who yield to mortal transgressions habitually, wantonly and licen-

tiously. If they doubted whether in a given case they consented to a mortal sin, they would have to assume, since they always consent at other times, and since they have no proof to the contrary in this one instance, that they gave their consent here, too; for if they had not given it, they would be fully conscious of their resistance, for its having been so singular and striking.

Penitents who are neither lax nor scrupulous confess their doubtful sins with spiritual profit, even though they are not strictly obliged to do it. The profit lies in their exercise of humility, their greater self-knowledge, and the opportunity they give their confessor to guide them more closely and reliably. But even they, to forestall scrupulosity, always remember that, while they are confessing their doubtful sins, they are not obligated to it. Similarly all pious people, even the mildly scrupulous, confess their venial sins, the number and certain unusual circumstances of them for the aforesaid reasons; always remembering, however, that this confession is altogether optional, and at no time, nor in any way, obligatory.

It is needless to add that no sin at all is ever forgiven without sorrow for it. But, as will be explained in a subsequent chapter, this sorrow does not have to be applied expressly and individually to every sin; it is sufficient if it comprises all sins through the universal motive that is

the spring of it, or inspires it. For example, if one is thoroughly sorry for having offended God in whatsoever way because he loves God above all things, his contrition embraces everyone of his sins: the venial as well as the mortal, the doubtful as well as the certain, the forgotten as well as the remembered sins.

Not only must the penitent confess the mortal sins of which he is conscious, but he must also declare the nature, and the number of his sins, together with those circumstances of them which add one or more mortal sins to the main act or omission. As to the nature of the sin, the penitent must manifest not only the precise kind of sin which he committed, but he must also state whether he sinned in thought, desire, word or deed, against charity, purity, justice or whatever virtue he may have violated.

The Number of Sins

The number of mortal sins must be accurately given whenever this is feasible. If the precise number can not be given, it must be given as approximately as possible. Mortal sin is so terrible an event in a Christian's life that, in case he has had the misfortune to incur it, he should know exactly how often it happened to him. If your home had burned down repeatedly, for instance, you would recall most definitely just how often it occurred. You would even remember the days

on which it took place, because it was so horrid and crushing a calamity. Yet a mortal sin in a Christian's life is an infinitely greater catastrophe than if his earthly home is consumed by fire. Hence, if he is interested in his eternal salvation, he will recall very distinctly just how many times this disaster came over him. When one can not recall the exact number of his mortal sins, he should give the number as closely as he can by saying, for example, how many times he sinned against a particular precept or virtue every day, week, month or year, in thought, desire, word, deed, by neglect or default.

The Circumstances of Sins

The circumstances attending sins are either of a kind as merely to aggravate a sin, or they are such as add one or more sins to the act or omission. Aggravating circumstances are, for instance, the duration or the intensity of the act, and the material volume involved in certain sins. If one lingers wilfully in impure or hateful thoughts an entire hour without a moral interruption, he sins more grievously than one who wilfully entertains such thoughts only a minute: yet he commits but one sin, even as the latter commits one sin: hence he does not have to mention how long he pursued those sinful thoughts.

If one steals a hundred thousand dollars from a wealthy man, he sins more grievously than

another who steals five hundred dollars from the same man: yet he commits but one sin, and consequently—say he has already returned the money when he confesses—he is not obliged to state the amount of his theft. It is sufficient if he declares that it was considerable, or constituted a mortal sin.

The Ruination of Innocence

If one seduces to impurity a thoroughly innocent person, he sins much more grievously than if he sinned with a debauched and fallen person: yet he commits the same sin with the one as he would with the other: as a result he does not have to mention the fact of the person's anterior innocence. The scandal is immensely more shocking, of course, and terribly consequential: yet the fact of the girl having been innocent does not add a new or other sin; it merely aggravates, albeit in a terrific degree, the sin that is being committed.

While there is no obligation to mention these and similar aggravating circumstances in the confession of mortal sins, persons who are not scrupulous usually do well by declaring them. They thereby practice more humility and greater self-effacement; they give the confessor a clearer idea of their state of conscience and qualify him to direct them more practically and effectively; they get a better knowledge and, consequently,

a deeper hatred and a livelier distrust of themselves; while they acquire more peace of mind and a greater joy of heart. Yet, even while they mention them, they always remember that they do so without being at all obligated to it. Scrupulous persons do better by abstaining entirely from advertng to the aggravating circumstances of their sins.

Stealing From the Church

Those circumstances which either change a venial into a mortal sin, or add one or more mortal sins to the act or omission itself, must be declared in confession. The reason is obvious. Every mortal sin of which the penitent is conscious must be mentioned; and since in our supposition these circumstances represent or constitute one or more additional mortal sins, they must be manifested so these sins may be confessed. If one steals a considerable amount of money from the church, for example, he would not be confessing all his mortal sins if he merely told the priest that he stole much money; for besides the sin of theft he committed the sin of sacrilege by stealing from the church; hence he would have to mention this circumstance. In like manner if a child would grievously and unjustly strike its parent, it would not cover its duty of confession by declaring that it seriously assaulted some one, since it

would thus be mentioning but one mortal sin while it committed two, namely one against charity, and the other against the piety due its parent.

A Vague Confession

A man comes to confession and says: "Father, I have been impure." This is entirely too general an assertion, and should never be uttered without the necessary qualification. The priest will ask the penitent if he was impure in thought, word or deed. He may answer: "In action." This again is too indefinite. The priest will query further: "Were you impure with yourself or with another?" The penitent replies: "With another." The priest will ask: "Of the same or the opposite sex?" The penitent says: "Of the opposite sex." The priest wants to know if the penitent, or the accomplice of the sin, or both, were married. The penitent answers in the affirmative. The priest finally asks if the penitent and the accomplice were closely related. The penitent states that the accomplice was his sister-in-law.

Four Sins in One Act

By this one act of impurity the penitent, owing to the circumstances of the case, committed four mortal sins: against purity in the first place; against charity for sinning with another and there-

by committing scandal; against justice for committing adultery, being a married man or sinning with one who was married; and against piety for sinning with a close relative and thereby committing incest. He should have declared all these circumstances in the first place and saved the priest the trouble of putting all those questions by confessing: "Father, I am a married man. I committed adultery with my married sister-in-law."

Conscience Reigns Supreme

The circumstance which plays the most important role in the appraisal of sins is the condition of the respective person's conscience at the performance of the act in question. The malice of the act is always in proportion to the cognizance of it in the actor's conscience at the time of its commission. In other words, just as the conscience, rightly or wrongly, judges of an act when it is consented to, so it must be judged when its sinfulness is being discussed.

If, for example, in doing something objectively unlawful, a person inculpably considers it licit, or only a venial sin, although it is in reality a mortal sin, he either commits no sin, or only a venial sin, respectively. Whereas, if he holds what he is doing to be a mortal sin, when in itself it is only a venial sin or no sin at all, he actually is committing a mortal sin by consenting to the act which in his mind is a mortal sin. This principle, however,

which refers to consciences or minds that are normal, must be applied considerably and circumspectly in more or less aggravated cases of scrupulosity.

As the confession of the sins against the Sixth Commandment usually offers the greatest difficulty to the penitent, not only because of their shamefulness, but also because of his being at a loss as to how to mention them, I may advise the reader that in my books "Plain Talks on Marriage" and "Youth's Pathfinder", the method of confessing sins of impurity is plainly indicated for married and single people, respectively. It will there be learned, I believe, that while it is shameful to perpetrate sins of impurity, it is honorable, and should not be difficult at all, to confess them humbly and contritely.

They Feel Uneasy

Readers of this book, who have just perused the portion relating to the confession of the substantial circumstances of mortal sins, may of a sudden feel uneasy as to their past confessions, since in their former declarations of sins they have not always paid attention to or made mention of these circumstances, not being aware of their obligation to do so: hence they are now afraid lest their former confessions were invalid and have to be repeated. This is by no means the case.

Whenever you go to confession God only expects of you that you do the best you can in your condition, in view of your actual knowledge and understanding at the moment you confess. When you do this, you have done your part, and God does the rest.

As a child or young person, with your age's defective knowledge of religious things in general and the requirements of confession in particular, God did not expect you to confess with the knowledge and precision you are possessed of today. If then you did what you could, you did your duty in the confessional, and all your sins were forgiven, without any ulterior obligation on your part to repeat or improve their confession later on.

No Cause for Worry

Moreover, since you were ignorant of the substantial circumstances of your mortal sins when you confessed them, the supposition is warranted that you were equally ignorant of them when you did them; and consequently, not having a clear knowledge of the various or additional mortal sins you were objectively or materially doing, because of the attending circumstances, you were in reality not guilty of them, as no one can be guilty of a specified sin without being somehow aware of it while he is doing it. You have, then, no cause for worry, and no obligation to repeat those confessions or even to supplement them by

the accuracy you are capable of now, but were incapable of then.

Only in case you are certain that one or more of your former confessions were substantially incomplete, considering your actual obligation at the time of their performance, are you bound to remedy or supply the defect whenever you become conscious of it. With the assistance of the confessor this is so easily and readily done that there is no reason why you should not gladly submit to it on behalf of your peace of mind and joy of heart.

On the very day of His resurrection, and the institution of holy penance, Jesus allowed His followers to entertain groundless worries, in order to show the futility of undue anxiety regarding the difficulty of confession on the part of the penitent sinner. Approaching the grave of Jesus, the pious women "said one to another: Who shall roll us back the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And looking, they saw the stone rolled back. For it was very great" (Mark, 16, 3, 4). The disciples going to Emmaus were downhearted and said to Jesus, Whose identity was hidden from them: "We hoped that it was He Who should have redeemed Israel . . . Then He said to them: O foolish, and slow of heart to believe" (Luke, 24, 21, 25). He had already redeemed Israel. Every well-meaning sinner's difficulties as to confession vanish ere he is aware of it.

CHAPTER XI.

The Tribunal of Mercy

"I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord, for Thou wast angry with me: Thy wrath is turned away, and Thou hast comforted me" (Isa., 12, 1).

AN INNOCENT little girl of eight years came home from school one day crying. Her mother asked her what the trouble was. The child replied: "Sister said that we all have to go to confession this afternoon." "Well, what of it?" queried the mother. "I had only one sin," the child answered, "and I have forgotten what it was. So I can't go to confession." There are a number of adults who stay away from confession on the plea that they have nothing to confess. They are usually those, however, who, instead of saying they have nothing to confess ought to say they prefer not to become aware, through the process of preparing for and going to confession, how much they really have to confess. Regarding their pretended innocence and sinlessness they ought to take to heart the words of the Apostle: "Judge not before the time; until the Lord come, Who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (1 Cor., 4, 5).

God Gives Us An Option

The holy sacrament of penance is administered after the manner of a court trial or judgment. Hence the confessional is often called the sacred tribunal, or court, of penance. To this court we are not cited or dragged against our will, however, but we have recourse to it of our own accord, in pursuance of the words of St. Paul: "If we judge ourselves, we should not be judged" (1 Cor., 11, 31). Here again we have a striking evidence of the infinite mercy of God as manifested in the institution of holy penance. No matter in what way and how often we have sinned, before He takes the judgment of us into His own hands God gives us an option on it, as it were, and promises us that, if we judge ourselves in sincerity and contriteness in the tribunal of holy penance, there will be no further room for His judgment of us. Suppose an earthly judge would make a similar announcement to the culprits arraigned before his tribunal: how happy and grateful they would be.

The Divine Shelter House

Viewed in this light, the confessional appears to us as a welcome refuge from the very anger of God. In olden times the churches possessed and actually enjoyed the so-called privilege of the sanctuary. If a culprit was hunted by the officers of the law, and took refuge in the church, he was

immune from the power of the law. In canon 1179 of the Code the Church still claims this privilege for her temples, even though most of the modern governments make no allowance for its operation. But against the very justice, vengeance and wrath of God we have such a sanctuary which, provided we hie ourselves to it betimes with the proper disposition, will shield us from the ire of the Almighty Himself. It is the little, insignificant and unpretentious-looking shelter-house of the confessional. God alone knows how many sinners, by having recourse to this divine shelter-house, have saved and are saving themselves from "the storm of darkness" (Jude, 13) that seemed to have been reserved for them forever.

Three Agents

Holy penance being administered after the manner of a court trial or judgment, we can distinguish in its reception, as we do in every trial; three principal agents or factors: the judge, the plaintiff and the defendant. In the court of penance Christ is the judge, not in His visible figure, but in the person of the priest, who is His delegate, ambassador and plenipotentiary. The priest acts in the Name and wields the power of Jesus. Hence, when speaking the words of absolution, he does not say: "Jesus Christ absolves you from your sins;" but he says: "I

absolve you from your sins," since He speaks and acts in the very Name of God; hence he phrases his declaration as though God Himself were speaking.

Our Lord's Disguises

Our Lord has assumed many disguises. In the Holy Eucharist He disguises Himself under the form of bread. In the children and the poor He disguises Himself in the appearance of lowliness and poverty. In holy penance He disguises Himself in the person of the functioning priest. Legends tell us that Jesus has already appeared in reality, in a visible, human form, in or from a sacred host, and also in or from the figure of some poor person in distress, in order to prove the reality of the respective disguises, to stimulate the belief in them, and to encourage a conduct in accordance with this belief, so everyone would behave towards the consecrated host and, relatively, to the little and poor ones, as though they were dealing directly with our Savior Himself.

In the same manner should the penitent act in the confessional towards the priest. He should tell the priest his sins as though he were confessing to Jesus Christ in person. Indeed, if you knew our Lord were in the confessional listening to your story, you would be altogether sincere, without the least inclination to hide or unduly palliate your sins; and you would recite them with

the utmost humility, the deepest contrition, the warmest love and most confiding trust and hope. The more you assume the same attitude now, the more peace, comfort, joy and help will you derive from the reception of the holy sacrament.

All Priests Alike

If you take this view of the priest in the confessional, you will above all remember that in the divine power of forgiving sins all priests are alike. And since this power is your main reason for frequenting the sacred tribunal, you will discriminate as little as possible between priest and priest, or between confessor and confessor. As long as the priest can be the agent of divine pardon to you, he is welcome as your confessor, whatever may or may not be his human magnetism or fascination. In other words, in the priest you will never overestimate the merely human, natural, or personal qualities or lack of them at the expense of the divine power with which he is vested.

To refer again to the parallel case of the sacred host, another disguise of our Lord, no sensible Catholic discriminates between a large or small, between a round or square, between a thick or thin, between a pretty and a clumsily shaped consecrated wafer, for he knows Jesus Christ is as much hidden and operative under the form of one as of the other. Likewise a believing

Catholic differentiates as little as possible between priests as to their power of forgiving sins with reference to himself. He knows that priests, being human, are not alike. One is holier, more learned, more clever, more charming, and more inviting than another: but as to the power of forgiving sins, there is no difference whatever: hence he is about as willing to approach the one as the other.

Bank Checks

One bank check may be signed in a very awkward and a barely legible hand; the other may be signed in a beautiful calligraphy: if both signatures are good, or by reliable men, the checks are honored by the banks in the same manner. It may even happen that the almost illegible signature represents or endorses the handing over of a much larger sum than the pretty handwriting. Similarly a penitent, by confessing with much personal sacrifice to a priest against whom he feels a certain personal shyness or even revulsion, may derive far greater merit from his pious exercise than if he confessed to one to whom he felt personally attracted and easily confiding. When you go abroad and procure a passport from the secretary of state, and have it signed by the various consuls as you travel from country to country, you pay no or little attention to the personality of the men as long as they attach their official signatures to your passport and allow

you to proceed on your journey. Whenever you enter the confessional you request to receive a passport to heaven or, at least, to have the one, which you already have, confirmed. Each priest has the same power to give or renew this passport of yours, as an official agent of the Almighty. If your object, then, is to procure this passport or the confirmation of it, why care much whether this or that agent issues or signs it?

Choice of Confessors

In saying this I am by no means losing sight of the generally admitted fact that, since Jesus instituted men as the ministers of His sacraments, he wanted them to act and also to appeal, in a way, as human beings, personally and variously, with a greater or lesser degree of magnetism and effectiveness. Consequently He left to the faithful a considerable margin for human freedom and preference in the choice of the ministers by whom they were to be helped towards salvation. Hence it can not be wrong for a penitent to choose to go to confession to and be absolved by one confessor rather than another, for in no sphere are the faithful inclined to be so choicy in the selection or the declension of a minister of salvation as in regard to confession.

It is perfectly legitimate, then, and fully in keeping with our Lord's plan of divine economy that the faithful be reasonably guided by their

personal appeal and preference in the choice of their confessors or other ministers of salvation. Yet this personal discrimination must always remain within the bounds of faith, reason, virtue and common sense. It is even advisable for a penitent to go to confession to the priest to whom he feels he can confide the secrets of his soul with greater ease and less embarrassment, and in whose guidance and direction he places unreserved trust and acquiescence. And he will do well in adhering to this same confessor regularly and permanently for various reasons, as has been previously stated.

He Is the Loser

Yet this adhesion to one priest should never grow so strong that the penitent can not readily approach any other priest for the forgiveness of his sins, in case he can not go to his regular confessor conveniently for the time being. Once a penitent has contracted the mental or emotional attitude that he can only go to one priest to confession, he obviously has allowed the secondary considerations of confession to preponderate over the primary purpose, and he himself is the loser in consequence.

Nor should a penitent easily permit himself to conceive so great a personal disinclination or shyness towards any priest as to consider it quite impossible to go to confession to him in

case no other confessor was available. If, traveling in Europe, for instance, you were eager to procure the visa of your passport on your way home to America, you would not allow a personal apathy for the respective consul to stand in the way of the acquisition of the visa. You would readily over-ride your feelings in the matter to obtain the official stamp and signature on your passport, no matter by whom it was given.

She Waited Two Hours

I remember a pious maiden lady telling me one day, that she would ordinarily and gladly wait two hours to go to confession to a certain much sought confessor than to go to any other priest without delay. In my mind I did not approve of this view or practice, but rather considered it excessively human and personal in reference to the sacrament. Once or again to wait for two hours to go to a certain expert director of souls, in order to get the benefit of his enlightening, soothing and inspiring spiritual treatment, is perfectly in order. But once he has administered this treatment so the penitent is thoroughly aware of the nature of it—unless a new spiritual situation has developed, of which his diagnosis and direction are desired—it hardly seems reasonable and conformable to the correct view of the sacrament of penance, if week after week the same penitents wait hours and hours for his ad-

ministration of absolution, while perhaps in the same church the willing services of one or more other priests, invested with the same divine power, remain simultaneously unsolicited and unused.

This impresses me as being about the same as if in the desert, when our Lord bade the apostles to distribute the miraculous bread and fishes, almost uncontrollable crowds would have flocked around Peter and John to receive their food from them, while the other apostles were trying in vain to relieve the congestion, since no one cared to take doles from them; and in consequence the distribution would have lasted hours and hours longer than it did. Would such a procedure have pleased our Lord? Would it have been reasonable? Do people act thus when there is question of receiving corporal or material benefits?

The Priest's Wondrous Power

Nothing is more conducive towards engendering in the penitent a fruitful disposition for a good confession than the proper conception of the wondrous power and stupendous dignity of the priest who administers the sacrament of penance. After all that has been said relative to the priest's divine authority in the confessional, it is easy for us now to sum up the grandeur of his office. He is deputed by God as His own legate with full power to act regarding the soul's forgiveness

and consequent salvation. He is a divinely appointed committee of one to act as a board of pardon definitely and finally in questions involving eternal life and eternal death. He is commissioned by God to moisten immortal souls, who through sin and crime have made themselves amenable to God's everlasting curse and vengeance, with the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, and thus render them immune from the deadly stroke of God's avenging wrath. Even as Moses of old, by holding his arms aloft, won the victory for his people, so the priest, as he elevates his hand while he speaks the words of absolution over the penitent, gains for him a decisive victory over the enemies of his soul; yea, over the very justice of God.

Keys and Locks

The power of the keys, granted by our Lord directly and absolutely to St. Peter and his successors, the bishops of Rome, and indirectly and dependently to every priest who receives jurisdiction from the pope, beautifully and pregnantly exemplifies the power of the priest in the confessional. The priest has and uses the keys to several very mysterious and invincible locks which baffle every human power, defy every human ingenuity, and challenge every human intrusion. The priest opens these locks by his god-like power in the confessional. First of all he unlocks the

human breast which, in the jealous preservation of its private, personal, very intimate and sacred secrets, is impervious to every human scrutiny. Without any apparent effort he lures these secrets from the human breast, using neither force nor compulsion, but only the sweet and delicious magnetism of the promise of pardon which is inherent in his divine office. Men and women would tell these secrets to no one but God; in fact, they would like to hide them from themselves forever. Yet they tell them to the priest because they are convinced he is the representative and ambassador of God.

Further Locks

Another lock over which the priest in the confessional has easy control is the very bosom of God. Through his ministry in the confessional he chases from the heart of God every vestige of eternal vengeance for the penitent's soul, and replaces it with divine and ineffable love and friendship. Then he takes from God's bosom, as it were, a part of God's own life, sanctifying grace. He unlocks the innermost recesses of the human soul, banishes sin from it, and puts sanctifying grace in its place. He proceeds to unlock the treasury of God's heavenly riches, and restores to the soul all the supernatural merits it had previously acquired, but which it had forfeited through mortal sin. He unlocks the treasury of

the Church, and makes the soul once more a partaker of its spiritual bounties, by rendering it again an active and vital member of the communion of saints.

Finally the priest, by the mystic words of absolution, at once unlocks the gates of heaven which were shut to the penitent's soul in sin, and firmly locks the gates of hell which were ajar to receive the sin-laden soul. All this is comprised by the power of the keys entrusted to and exercised by the priest in the sacred tribunal. No wonder the Holy Fathers went into rapturous wonderment when they contemplated this marvelous power. And no penitent who properly apprehends and justly evaluates it can approach the confessional of any priest without a sentiment of the deepest awe, reverence, admiration and gratitude, which will entirely overshadow every merely human reflection regarding the personality of the individual priest.

The Plaintiff and the Defendant

If the priest is the judge in the tribunal of penance, who is the plaintiff and who is the defendant? The penitent is both plaintiff and defendant. He comes to accuse himself, and no one else. His accusation is completely focused on his own sins, and his sins only. Penitents do well in always bearing this in mind.

What does a plaintiff do in a suit before court? He brings all available evidence against the defendant to convict him of guilt. He searches every store of information, pursues every avenue of testimony, and traces every hint of suspicion in order to lay bare all the guilt of the defendant, regardless of the defendant's present feelings or his future lot. He is out to prove the guilt, and all the guilt, of the defendant.

Such, then, is our business against ourselves when we go to confession. We aim to make out the strongest possible case against ourselves, irrespective of our feelings or of what may happen to us. We go to tell our sins, not our virtues; to tell our sins frankly, just as they appear to us, without excuse or palliation. We do not go to confession to reveal the sins of others. If charity, the greatest of virtues, binds anywhere, it obliges in the reception of a sacrament. We must never implicate others in our recital of sins beyond what is absolutely necessary.

She Confessed Her Husband's Sins

A story is told of a woman who came to confession to say that she really had not committed what one could call a sin. She admitted, however, that she had yielded at times to slight anger, adding: "But, Father, if you knew the brute I have for a husband, how he drinks and curses and abuses me in the vilest manner, you would

wonder how I can contain myself at all.” The priest then bade her to say three Hail Marys for her sins, and twenty-five rosaries for the sins of her husband. When she demurred at being bidden to say a penance for her husband’s sins, the priest remarked chidingly: “Why do you confess your husband’s sins, if you are not willing to recite the penance for them?” Every sensible penitent feels he has enough sins of his own to confess without directly or indirectly, barring necessity, dragging in the sins of others, who have no chance to defend or vindicate themselves under the circumstances.

The List of Sins

To be an effective prosecuting attorney against yourself in the court of penance, you must examine your conscience thoroughly and impartially. You begin by making a fervent ejaculation to the Holy Ghost to invoke His aid. There are various ways of examining one’s conscience. The one which has served you well in the past is no doubt the best for you. If you have not gone to confession for a long time and, inferentially, have led a careless and godless life, it will behove you carefully to read through the list of sins, or the form of examination of conscience, which you find in prayerbooks.

Even if you go regularly to confession and lead a good Christian life, it may profit you here and

there, say at the time of a mission or retreat—provided you are not scrupulous—to peruse closely such a list of sins. Maybe one or the other point of Christian morality has been escaping you, or your conscience has grown dull and callous regarding it. By this perusal of an examination form your conscience may again be duly awakened and stirred. If you are scrupulous, however, you will likely derive more harm than profit from such a perusal of categories of sins.

Two Extremes

As in all other things, there are two extremes to be avoided in the examination of conscience. Some penitents examine their conscience too much; others examine it too little. The golden mean is the road to follow. They who examine their conscience too much are called scrupulous. We have already attended sufficiently, and more, to their case. Here it may again be added, however, that even healthy-minded persons of piety often over-accentuate the obligation of the recital of sins in confession, stretching it to points our Savior never had in mind in its institution. A complete recital of all sins, even the most venial, is hardly possible; hence one should not grow over-anxious about it, as though God could not or would not forgive a sin which was unintentionally overlooked in the examination. An

ordinary earnest and sensible human effort is all that God requires.

There are others who examine their conscience too little. They complain they can not find or, as they put it, "rake anything together" for their confession. Nothing occurs to them as worthy of mention. Such a person is either a saint, or his conscience is not so delicate, so sensitive and responsive as it should be. St. Teresa of Jesus went to confession every day; St. Francis Borgia twice a day; and they always had something to say. Religious, priests and bishops as a rule go to confession every week, and in spite of their life in and for God they always have something to confess. Hence a man living in the world, and often also with the world, rather deceives himself woefully if his greatest difficulty lies in trying to find something to say when he goes to confession.

The Emperor's Sins

Some, when they go to confession, omit to examine and, consequently, to accuse themselves regarding the fulfillment of their particular vocational duties which form a great, if not the greater part, of their life's task. It is related of the Emperor Charles V of Spain that, after he confessed his sins to a priest one day, the confessor charged him, saying: "You have confessed the

sins of Charles; now confess the sins of the emperor." This story emphasizes the duty of every penitent carefully to scan the manner of his compliance with his special duties as a father, husband, lover, employer or employe, or whatever his peculiar station in life may be, when he examines his conscience before confession.

There are those, too, who, when their conscience, as the voice of God, upbraids them for this or that sin, instead of hearkening to it, ignore it. It says, for example: "Your conduct in married life militates directly against the primary purpose of marriage, and is therefore mortally sinful;" or, "Your behavior in courtship, in taking or allowing such obscene liberties and familiarities, is grievously wrong;" or, "You may not live in such enmity and vindictiveness against your neighbor, and still be in the state of grace;" or, "You must restore that money which does not belong to you, or pay those debts you should have paid long ago;" or, "You may not use such tactics in business, since they are evidently dishonest."

They Debate

What is their reply to this charge? They begin to debate with their conscience; to argue speciously against it; to choke it and put it to sleep, saying within themselves: "In my case this is justified;" or, "If others do it, why can't I?"

or, "Everybody practically does as I do: hence it can not be so bad, and I need not mention it." The fact is, they do not want to own that their conduct is sinful, not so much from a shame of confessing it, as from a disinclination to discontinue it. They want to keep on doing what their conscience tells them they must not do. If we wish, we can deceive ourselves. This is the easiest thing in the world. We can also deceive the priest in the confessional. This, too, is not hard. But even if we would, we can not deceive the all-knowing God. He searches the reins and the heart (Jer., 11, 20).

The Vulnerable Spot

It is usually in regard to our predominant weakness and ruling passion that we are inclined to be more or less wilfully blind. Yet nowhere is spiritual blindness more fatal. One of the greatest benefits of confession lies in its keeping our attention focused on our soul's chief infirmity and, consequently, its greatest need. We all have our domineering propensity. It is either ruling and ruining, or threatens to rule and ruin us, if we do not keep it closely in check. Passions are splendid servants but terrible masters, as an old saying puts it. Everyone who falls from grace can trace his fall to his ruling passion. Achilles was the most swift-footed among the ancient Greek warriors. But in his foot, too, was

his one vulnerable spot, in which he was wounded unto death.

Similarly the source of everyone's strength and success can be, and often is, the lurking place of his weakness and the cause of his downfall. David, Solomon, Samson, Peter, Judas and many others are biblical examples of the destructive power of one's ruling passion, once it is given the reins, uncontrolled by reason and virtue. It starts with making apparently inconsequential demands, involving at most only venial sins. No sooner these demands are weakly yielded to, they increase in volume, moment and intensity, until they end by insisting on the forfeiture of all will-power, goodness and honor.

"Watch!"

In regard to this insidious course of one's ruling passion our Savior exhorts us, saying: "Watch ye, and pray that ye enter not into temptation" (Matt., 16, 42). Nothing is more conducive towards this important watch over the behavior of our predominant passion; its service or its havoc; its incipient or progressive excesses; or its gradual decline and moderation, than a thorough and rigid examination of conscience regarding it before each confession.

While it is wholesome, therefore, to be frankly sincere in finding and telling all our sins, we must on the other hand be on our guard against the

opposite excess of finding and telling sins which we have not committed. It is wrong, for instance, merely to state that you have missed Mass on Sundays, or eaten meat on Fridays, without any qualification, if the facts are, that you were too ill to hear Mass or to abstain from meat. You tell sins without having done them. If, from a commendable delicacy of conscience, you feel more at peace if you mention those involuntary, and merely seeming, departures from the laws of the Church anyway, you must not fail to add the circumstances that justified them.

It is wrong, too, if one from scrupulosity mentions a very large number of times for his sins, only to feel satisfied that he is saying enough, although he knows he is in reality saying too much. Or, if one confesses all his doubtful sins as though they were certain, just to know that he surely confessed aplenty: albeit he knows he is exaggerating from mere nervousness and undue timidity. "Be not over just: and be not more wise than is necessary, lest thou become stupid" (Eccl., 7, 17).

A good way to find one's sins is to go through the commandments of God and the precepts of the Church, and to ask oneself at each one: "Have I sinned against this law in thought, word or deed, by commission or omission? In what manner? Mortally or venially? How often?" It is not necessary, and it is hardly advisable,

to make the complete review of all these commandments every time one goes to confession, if one goes often and carefully; but here and there, say at missions and retreats, the review will do no harm to a person that is not an actual or prospective victim of scrupulosity.

In the following pages I shall endeavor to make the aforesaid review of the commandments in the interest of my readers. It will not be possible to touch on all the points of conscience affecting every class of readers; but I shall aim to mention and explain the more ordinary transgressions Christians in general are commonly liable to. At any rate the perusal of this review may for one thing or another arrest the reader's attention profitably, and lead on to further private reflection and examination that will have wholesome spiritual results.

With the grace of God it may operate similarly to Jesus' bidding to St. Peter: "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught" (Luke, 5, 4). Complying with our Lord's charge St. Peter, who before had caught nothing at all, perhaps because he stayed in shallow water, caught "a very great multitude of fishes" (ib., 6). In the same way, a sinner may not find a single sin through a mere superficial inspection of his conscience, but if he launches out into the deep recesses of it he may find "a very great multitude" of sins.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD

The First Commandment

I am the Lord, thy God. Thou shalt not have strange gods before Me. Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing to adore it.

GOUR first thought in reflecting upon this commandment may be: "Here is a commandment I need not dwell on further. It never enters my mind to make any graven things. Even if I cared to make them, I should not know how. And if I made them, I should never be tempted to adore them. Hence I can go to the next commandment." But there is more to the First Commandment than this prohibition regarding graven things or images. The First Commandment enjoins upon us the worship of God, and whatever contravenes the true worship of God is a sin against the First Commandment.

The Worship of God

We worship God by adoration, petition, thanksgiving and propitiation. These four acts of religion are performed by prayer and sacrifice. Prayer comprises the theological virtues of faith,

hope, charity and contrition. We are therefore bound to pray to God and, consequently, to believe in Him, to hope in Him, to love Him, and to be sorry for having offended Him.

If one would neglect to pray at all, in any form or fashion, directly and indirectly, for several months or more, he would be guilty of mortal sin, since he would be denying God the worship of the heart and mind that is due Him. But if one actually worships God, for instance, by attending holy Mass in a becoming manner every Sunday and holyday of obligation: even if he does not utter any formal prayers, or expressly make the acts of faith, hope, charity and contrition: he is not guilty of serious sin on this account, since he adores God by his conduct.

If one were in danger of committing a mortal sin, and he would be sure he would succumb to the danger if he did not pray for help, he would commit a grievous sin by neglecting prayer under the circumstances. This eventuality is rare, however, since there usually are other ways of vanquishing a temptation besides the immediate recourse to prayer. If one, who knew he was in the state of mortal sin, were in a dying condition, and would wilfully neglect to turn to God in prayer by making an act of contrition, he would be guilty of mortal sin for thus deciding to remain averse to God forever, and to forego his last chance of saving his soul.

The Daily Prayers

Is it a sin wilfully to omit one's morning, evening and table prayers? It is nowhere stated that one must pray the first thing in the morning, the last thing in the evening, and immediately before and after each meal. Yet it is quite a universal custom of Christians to pray at these periods. The reason is, if one does not pray then he will in all likelihood not pray at all; and not praying at all, he runs a great risk of getting away from God, of being less and less influenced by His grace, and of becoming, in consequence, a more easy and ready victim to temptation. It is a bad sign when a child begins to neglect saying good morning and good night to its parents, and to thank them for the benefits they confer upon it. In view of this, while it is not a sin once or again, even knowingly and wilfully, to omit these prayers, it bespeaks spiritual carelessness and indifference to neglect them habitually or for days and days together, and hence one may be guilty of venial sin on this score. For this reason good Catholics accuse themselves of this neglect in the confessional. They are well aware that they have done no mortal sin by omitting these prayers, and are therefore not bound to confess it; they are not even sure they have sinned venially. Yet they are afraid, if they make light of this neglect and forego every mention of it, they may grow more and more lukewarm in piety and

proceed from dangerous tepidity to gross laxity of conduct.

This does not mean that we have to make a public display of our daily prayers when we are, so to speak, in the open. If you take your meals in a restaurant, for example, you need not attract general notice by the way you say your table prayers. This would not be advisable, as a rule, since it would not make for the honor of religion and the exaltation of piety. It is sufficient on such occasions if you pray privately and unostentatiously by thanking God in your heart for His bounties towards you. Certainly, if the meal were a formal affair of Catholics, say the banquet of a club or other association, the public saying of grace before and after the banquet would be very much in order and should never be dispensed with.

A young lady naively asked her confessor, saying: "Father when I come home from a party at one o'clock in the morning, must I say my night or morning prayers?" The priest replied: "A nice Catholic girl does not come home at such an ungodly hour."

To be wilfully distracted or to distract others in prayer, at Mass, or any other exercise of devotion is a venial sin. To behave irreverently or disrespectfully in church by indulging in uncalled-for and ill-timed conversation or unmannerly conduct is also a venial sin. If the irreverence against the

house of God were gross, vicious and shocking, it would be a mortal sin. Of everyone of His temples God says: "My house is the house of prayer" (Luke, 19, 46); and to those who enter, the Lord seems to say: "The place whereon thou standest is holy" (Josue, 5, 16).

Sins Against Faith

One sins against faith by wilfully doubting, questioning or denying articles of the faith in thought, word or deed. If there is question only of certain legends or pious beliefs which are not a part of the sacred deposit of the faith, it is not a sin to disbelieve or doubt them, just so one behaves reverently and decently about it. It is related for instance of St. Patrick, that he genuflected in adoration towards God two or three hundred times a day. If one seriously called this in question, saying the saint may have genuflected but forty or fifty times daily, or not even so often: he would not sin on that account, as long as he was not guilty of wilful raillery or unseemly ridicule in connection with his remark. But if one deliberately doubted, for example, if our Lord was really present in the Holy Eucharist, or if the Church had the power of forgiving sins, or if there was a future reward or punishment, he would sin mortally against the faith; and if he expressed this doubt in the presence of others, he would in addition commit grievous scandal.

Dangerous Literature

Without the required permission and necessary precaution to read books, magazines or papers, or to listen to harangues that expressly impugn the faith is mortally sinful because of the great danger of suffering detriment of the faith. We must never lose sight of the fact, that our holy faith is a gratuitous gift of God given us in trust. It is not an acquired virtue, as is chastity and obedience, for instance, but an infused virtue, granted us by God without any anterior cooperation on our part. It is just as delicate and sensitive a virtue as is purity.

You would not say of a person who delighted in retailing or listening to obscene stories that he must be of a very chaste mind. You will rather say or at least think: "That person's heart is corrupt." So, too, if one enjoys speaking or listening to conversations against the faith he gives evidence that his Catholic faith is either dead or dying. And just as you are very careful, if you are concerned about the preservation of purity, to eschew persons whose speech is indecent, so you will scrupulously avoid persons who love to rail against or at least cast doubt upon the articles of Catholic belief, if you are interested in the maintenance of your greatest earthly treasure, your holy faith.

Company Keeping

The Catholic person who listlessly and wantonly keeps company with a non-Catholic, caring little or nothing about the jeopardy in which his or her own faith is thereby placed, is often guilty of a mortal sin against the faith by starting and nursing such a dangerous company which very likely, developing into a mixed marriage, will ultimately destroy the faith, as it is known to do in many sad instances. Not only the final apostasy is a sin, but also the incipient dallying with the danger of it by thoughtlessly and frivolously courting or encouraging one not of the faith towards a dangerous and baneful mixed marriage. It must be owned that not all mixed marriages are of this stamp—some, though comparatively very few, develop fortunately for both parties—; but for the lukewarm and heedless Catholic, a mixed marriage is usually synonymous with the Catholic party's defection from the faith. This defection practically begins the first day of the ill-fated courtship. And if all Catholics, as soon as they notice that they are keeping company with a non-Catholic, would mention this in the confessional, whether they felt guilty of sin or not, many a fatal mixed marriage would, as the saying is, be nipped in the bud, to the decided welfare of the penitent.



Their Vocation Is Holy

Every Catholic knows that grossly critical, faultfinding, carping and disparaging remarks about priests and Religious are not of themselves sins against the faith. Yet they are often serious sins, directed as they are against persons who are in a special manner consecrated to God and are moreover charged with a public religious office and trust. In theory it is quite possible to discriminate between the person and the sacred office or charge: in practice the two are not easily separated. I mean it will go hard to make derogatory remarks anent a priest or Religious without somehow weakening the prestige and diminishing the influence for good of the sacred person in question, and hardly without lowering in the hearers as well as in the speaker himself the general esteem and reverence for the holy vocation and dignity of the persons who are attacked or impugned.

Priests Are Human

It is a truism that priests and Religious are human. And being human, they have and always will have and discover human frailties and fallibilities. If you entered the seminary, or monastery, or nunnery today you would be the same man or woman, after you donned your new garb, that you were yesterday, with the same weak-

nesses and the same imperfections. But in view of their consecration to God, and the responsible office they hold in the social body, a good Catholic loves to consider the priests and Religious immune from vituperative and belittling remarks as well as from unkind and damaging gossip, and as far as in him lies he will see that they are and stay immune.

The great benefits the true Christian knows he receives through the priests and Religious, and the great sacrifices he is aware these consecrated persons make in order to be the agents of these benefits, are sufficient and more to actuate him not only to overlook the little foibles and shortcomings of these persons, but also to tender them the highest regard, the tenderest respect and the warmest recognition. St. Francis of Assisi, because of his high estimation of the sacred priesthood, could not be prevailed upon to become a priest. At the same time he entertained and demonstrated on every occasion his deep reverence and gratitude towards the priests of God. "If I met the lowliest and most insignificant priest in the world," he used to say, "and there was with him an archangel of heaven, I would first greet the priest; and then I would salute the archangel. The priest is much more to me than an archangel. He consecrates for me the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ."

The Catholic Attitude

The Catholic who bears in mind the heavenly and eternal privileges bestowed upon him through the priest will be little inclined to fix his eye on the individual priest's flaws of conduct and make them the subject of unkind and uncalled-for criticisms. "There is the man of God," he will say, "who made me a son of God through holy baptism, who forgives me my sins whenever I am liable to eternal punishment, who consecrates for and administers to me the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, who called down the blessing of God upon my marriage, and who will assist me in my passage to eternity. I love this man for what he means to me and for what he is the minister of to me. I love him for the great renuncements he has made and is continually making in order to be qualified to be the dispenser of these divine mercies unto me."

While the Religious Brothers and nuns do not administer the sacraments, they nevertheless in their way directly or indirectly aid the priests in their ministry, usually by preparing their charges to be living tabernacles of the Most High and vessels of divine election: hence they are deserving of the same high regard and consideration on the part of Catholics who are the beneficiaries of their sacrifices and services.

The Lord Is Their Sponsor

In the Old Law God insisted on reverence being paid to those who were consecrated to His service, and He threatened that He Himself would attend to the one who would abuse or vilify them. He is no less, but rather more intent on being the sponsor of the sacred rights and privileges of the persons especially dedicated to His service in the New Law.

Common experience seems to establish rather abundantly and graphically how ill they fare who are grossly irreverent and abusive towards the persons consecrated to the Lord. For one thing they appear to be particularly in danger of gradually forfeiting altogether the inestimable gift of faith, of which their ungrateful and irreligious conduct makes them unworthy. "God is not mocked" (Gal., 6, 7).

In a Ten-Cent Store

Not long ago I was making a purchase in a Ten-Cent Store. The girl who waited on me was exceptionally courteous and obliging. She was evidently a good Catholic girl and was glad to be at the service of a priest. She did not know me personally. Her manner impressed me very favorably. I began to reflect, if all Catholics, who in business or some other sphere have an occasion to minister to or wait on a priest, would show the same courtesy and eagerness to be helpful, how

much the life of priests would be sweetened and consoled. This would be a compensation for the rudeness and coldness they often meet with on the part of certain non-Catholics merely for being priests.

But sometimes non-Catholics show the priest more deference and obsequiousness than certain Catholics do. Travelling as I do in my missionary work, I was asked by a pious lady, who heard I was to pass through Chicago, her native town, kindly to visit her folk who had a store in the heart of the city, and give them her regards. As it meant no trouble for me I cheerfully consented to do so. When I entered the store rather heartily, I noticed that the young storekeeper was quite formal and uninviting. I asked for the owner, and was told that he was not in. I asked for the owner's daughter, and received the answer that she, too, was out. Then I briefly stated who I was and what was my errand. Suddenly the young man's face brightened up and his manner became very cordial as he said: "Father, they are both in. Go right back there and you will find them. They will be pleased to see you." When I asked him the reason of the previous cold reception I got, he said: "Father, I thought you came here to collect, and I did not want to be too encouraging."

It is an embarrassing feeling for many a priest that so many people, of and outside the faith,

whenever they see a priest approach, have an idea he is collecting, and they behave towards him accordingly, in a more or less forbidding way. Hence it makes a priest feel good when he receives warm, hearty and generous treatment from others just because he is a priest.

The story is old of the lady who, noticing the priest coming on a house to house collection tour for the parish, hurriedly hid away and told the children to tell him that mother was not at home. Unfortunately one of her feet was visible as she was standing behind the door in an adjoining room. The priest noticed it and said to the children: "It is too bad your mother did not take her feet along when she went out." It was an embarrassing situation, more for the woman than the priest. He, as many other priests, had grown accustomed to being told by word or sign that the inhabitant of the house was not at home—for the priest.

One sins against the faith by taking part in non-Catholic religious worship. To be the sponsor at a baptism, for instance, the ceremony of which is performed by a Protestant minister, is a grievous sin against the faith, because of the participation in non-Catholic worship which is implied in that official act. The same is to be said of being the official witness, or the so-called best man or bridesmaid at a wedding of non-Catholics contracted before a Protestant minister in his

religious capacity. If there is an urgent reason requiring a Catholic to be a passive witness at such a ceremony, and he has received the required permission from the ecclesiastical authorities, the assistance at the wedding in question is in no way sinful.

The Marriage Is Invalid

Catholics who pretendedly are married by a non-Catholic minister are, of course, even more guilty of a mortal sin against the faith. The Catholics who assume to be married by a civil magistrate, do not sin against the faith, but they sin mortally against the laws of the Church and against the dignity of the sacrament of marriage. In neither case is the marriage valid. The Catholics who act as best men or bridesmaids at a make-believe wedding of Catholics before a civil magistrate do not sin against the faith either; but they commit a grievous sin of scandal for helping and encouraging others to sin by attempting marriage sacrilegiously.

Merely for reasons of neighborliness, relationship, friendship or courtesy to be present at a non-Catholic worship, for instance a funeral or wedding, without any appearance of endorsing the worship in question, is not a sin. Yet the less Catholics do this—provided they can avoid or evade it with propriety—the better. The same is to be said with greater emphasis with reference

to the practice of attending non-Catholic services merely in response to the friendly invitation of an acquaintance, who wants his Catholic friend to go to his church after he has accompanied him to the Catholic church; or for reasons of personal curiosity to see how non-Catholics conduct their services; or just to have some place to go in order to while away the time somehow.

Obnoxious Liberalism

Even when there is no semblance of partaking in any way in the non-Catholic worship, the very uncalled-for attendance at it on the part of a Catholic will tend to be injurious to his Catholic faith, especially if this attendance is of frequent occurrence. It will beget in him an obnoxiously liberal or latitudinarian sentiment which gradually and unconsciously prompts him to believe, that after all it does not matter much whether one belongs to this church or that, so he believes something and practices religion somehow.

If this were true, we Catholics would be the biggest fools on earth and, as St. Paul says, the most miserable of men (1 Cor., 15, 19). Why should we adhere to so narrow and rugged a path to heaven, as our holy faith bids us to hold, if the broader and easier way of other religions would bring us just as safely to heaven? Even if the person in question suffered no personal diminution of faith by his attendance at non-Catholic wor-

ship—which is a more theoretical than practical assumption—he might give disedification to and create sinister impressions on other Catholics and also on non-Catholics who would see, but not understand the motives of, his conduct. Of course, whoever attends a non-Catholic worship in a manner as though he were a member of the cult always commits a sin against the faith. It is a ruling of the Church that a Catholic may never, not even from mere curiosity, or as an indifferent observer, be present at spiritistic seances.

Forbidden Societies

To join a society that is expressly forbidden by the Church, under pain of excommunication, is usually a sin against the faith. These societies, such as that of the Freemasons, for example, ordinarily have their own religious worship, tenets and practices, independent of and different from those of the Catholic Church. The Freemasons practically hold and teach, that as long as one believes in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, he need not bother about dogmas, beliefs or creeds. This position signifies a religion apart from that of the Catholic Church; hence a Catholic may not embrace it and still remain a Catholic; as little as he can become a Methodist or Lutheran, for example, and be a Catholic at the same time.

Superstition is a sin against the faith. Of itself it is a mortal sin, but they who are guilty of it are often more or less ignorant and poorly instructed, and consequently they may sin only venially or, in some cases, not at all. Superstition consists in attributing preternatural or supernatural powers to things, places, acts or persons that have received and now receive no such powers from God. Superstition is practiced in so manifold and various a manner that it is impossible to enumerate all the forms and expressions of it. Usually the less true faith one has the more he is inclined to be superstitious. Some of the most declared infidels have been and are known to be subject to the silliest and wildest superstitions.

Fortune-Tellers

It is superstitious to go to a professional fortune-teller or spiritistic medium for the revelation of hidden or future things which can not be known by natural processes of investigation and study. Do not say that you really do not believe in the craft of the fortune-teller, but that you go to him or her merely for curiosity and diversion. Once you pay good money to have your fortune told or your character read by a professional faker, you thereby disclose a lurking suspicion that perhaps the person has some mysterious access to the knowledge of occult and future things, and inferentially you are superstitious.

Otherwise, if you gave the person no credit for mysterious knowledge, you would as lief hand your money to your brother or husband and ask them to tell your fortune. In consideration of a dollar or two they could and would tell you the same outlandish and impossible things which the weird-looking woman tells you in the fortune-telling booth. Of course, to tell fortunes or to have them told merely and professedly for fun and pastime, say at a social gathering or a church fair, is not a sin but an innocent diversion as is a game of lotto, for instance, or one of the other hundred and more ways of luring money for good purposes from those who prefer to be coddled out of it rather than give it directly and unconditionally.

Good Luck: Ill Luck

Actually to believe, or to act as though one believed, that a horseshoe or rabbit's foot bring good luck, but a black cat, or the overturning of the salt-cellar, or the number thirteen, or the Friday bring ill luck, is superstition. Friday is the luckiest day mankind has had since the day of creation, for it was redeemed and won its title to heaven on that day; hence no sensible Christian looks upon Friday as foreboding evil. To believe in dreams may be and often is superstitious. Owing to the mysteries of mental telepathy, or the elusive influence of soul upon soul and mind

upon mind, there may be some connection between a dream and a forthcoming event; hence it is not necessarily superstitious to believe in such a connection in a given case.

Say you dreamt last night that your rich uncle was coming to visit you, and upon awakening this morning and reflecting upon your dream you felt inclined to believe your uncle was really coming, although you had not seen him for ages: this would not be superstition, since his resolution of visiting you might in some manner have been transmitted to your mind and produced the dream in question. It happens every now and then that, after having dreamed of a person with whom we have not been in contact for a long time, we either suddenly meet or receive a letter from said person.

A Thousand Dollars

It would be entirely different, however, if merely on the head of your dream you would be led to form uncharitable or unjust suspicions, or give decisions of moment indeliberately and foolishly. Suppose you had lost a wallet containing a thousand dollars in twenty-dollar bills. After worrying about the loss all day you would retire with the hope that you would discover in your dream how you lost it. You would dream that your neighbor, whom you had no other reason in the world to suspect of the theft, had stolen it. In consequence of this dream you would be out

and out convinced that he stole it, and you would take steps in accordance with this conviction. This would be superstition.

Or if a girl, for instance, after having convinced herself by a sensible process that she was called to the Religious state, dreams she ought to stay in the world, and in pursuance of this dream only she stays in the world for fear of being unhappy in the convent: she yields to superstition. Contrariwise, if a girl for no other reason but for a certain dream she has had is persuaded to go to the convent, she may easily be a victim of superstition. God has communicated and still at times communicates the vocation to the priestly or Religious life by means of a dream; but this manifestation is most extraordinary and must not be admitted but after a serious consultation with one's spiritual director.

Witches

To believe in witchcraft in a sensible way, by assuming that there is possible such a thing as an understanding with the devil and a league with him for evil purposes, to be achieved, however, in every case with the knowledge and tolerance of God only, so that the perpetrators of it are assured neither of the certainty nor of the regularity of the effects of their impious practices: this is not a sin against faith, since the Bible itself relates instances of this kind of witchcraft. But

definitely to point out a certain person as a witch, and to ascribe an evil eye or other sinister preternatural influences to her, is not only a sin against the faith, but also against charity and often, too, against justice, because of the serious damage accruing to the person in her reputation and standing in the community. The golden rule clamors for careful and close application here. Do not do unto others what you should not like others to do unto you.

Ashamed of the Faith

To be ashamed of the faith is a venial or mortal sin, dependently upon the gravity of the transgression. If one, out of shame, denies his faith outright; or if he denies it virtually, by transgressing important laws of the Church, for instance the law of Sunday Mass, or of abstinence on Friday, in order to make the impression that he is not a Catholic: he sins mortally.

If one, for mere shame, neglected to say grace at meals in his own home because of the presence of non-Catholic guests; or he would fail to lift his hat while passing a church or at meeting a priest, in view of the non-Catholics who were about: he would not sin grievously, as he was not transgressing any law of the Church. The Church does not enjoin upon us to perform the aforesaid acts, pious and becoming as they are in themselves. Hence their omission is not of itself a sin, although

the weak compliance with human respect might constitute a venial sin of spiritual cowardice in a given instance.

Scrupulous people usually have no reason whatever to consider themselves guilty of being ashamed of their faith for not performing certain acts of piety in the presence of others which they would perform if others were not present. No one is ordinarily called on to make a public display of his piety before others different from and in excess of what the Church expects of all the faithful of the same vocation. Hence it is usually not their holy faith scrupulous people are ashamed of, but their own, and often excessive and extravagant, manner of piety. This shame, of course, is no sin.

Prudence Is a Virtue

While one may never be ashamed of and deny his faith, on the other hand one is not bound always and everywhere to profess his faith and declare himself as a Catholic before everyone. He is only obligated to do this as far as his allegiance to the Church calls for it. At times he may allow others to be ignorant of his being a Catholic at all, or even to hold that he is not a Catholic.

When he would suffer serious inconvenience if he were found to be an adherent of the true faith, a Catholic may at times even consider himself exempt for the time being from certain positive

obligations of the Church in order to evade the great disadvantages threatening him in case of the discovery. Say a girl of a non-Catholic family secretly becomes a convert to the Church. Her people are so bitter against the Catholic faith that, if they learned of her conversion, they would expel her at once from her home and disown her completely. She may for a limited period conceal her adhesion to the Church by staying away from Mass and eating meat on Fridays with the permission of her pastor, who can dispense in these and similar circumstances. In such cases, however, one should never act but on the advice of one's pastor or confessor.

Evading the Sermon

Finally one sins against faith by being and remaining culpably ignorant of the necessary articles and the elementary practices of the faith. If one knows he is ill instructed in the substantial and primary truths of his religion and yet neglects to get the information he stands in need of, by listening to the sermons and instructions he has the opportunity to hear, or by reading the books he has a chance to peruse, he is guilty of a sin against faith.

A number of Catholics who consider themselves "cute" for being able, as they say, to steer clear of every sermon year in and year out, although they hear a short Mass on Sunday, are guilty of this

sin. The very ones who love the word of God least and avoid hearing it whenever they can, need it most, as a rule. Their mere attitude towards the spoken word of God seems to betray an essential lack of appraisal of the value and meaning of our faith. "He that is of God, heareth the words of God. Therefore you hear them not, because you are not of God" (John, 8, 47).

The Most Dangerous Sin

Against the theological virtue of hope one sins by despair, either by not hoping in God at all, or by hoping too little in Him; and by presumption, which means to hope in God in an inordinate and unwarranted manner. In a certain sense despair is the worst and most dangerous sin one can commit, inasmuch as of its very nature it precludes its own forgiveness. As long as one despairs of God's mercy he shuts himself off from the fruition of this mercy. Judas sinned terribly by betraying our Lord and perpetrating deicide: yet his eternal perdition was not ultimately due to this crime, unspeakably horrid though it was, but to his subsequent sin of despair which led him to commit suicide and thus definitely to place himself beyond the pale of God's infinite and inexhaustible mercy. Even after he delivered Jesus to His enemies he might have easily obtained pardon from our Lord through humble and

trustful repentance; but his despair hurled him into irretrievable self-destruction and eternal perdition.

This Sin Is Rare

If the consideration of God's mercy and ready pardon of sin is not merely a soothing reflection to a sinner who is actuated by passion or weakness to commit certain sins, but even serves as a motive or stimulant for him to sin the more, just because God is so merciful: he is guilty of presumption. This sin is rare, and the readers of a book like this are hardly ever guilty of it in a serious degree. Usually those are most afraid of committing or having committed this sin who are least in danger of it, owing to their very delicate and timorous conscience.

One sins grievously against the theological virtue of charity, or the love that is due to God, by direct hatred of God. This sin, because of its inherent malice, is the greatest sin there is. It is distinctly devilish, since the devil is always concentrated on hating God outright. Fortunately this sin, too, is rare, and practically never happens among conscientious people, much as certain scrupulous people imagine they are more or less guilty of it as a result of their morbid imaginations and weird hallucinations.

Sacrilege

The virtue of religion due to God is violated through sacrilege, which is an abuse or violation of sacred persons, places or things. A sacrilege is a venial or mortal sin, dependently on the levity or gravity of the act in question. If one steals a dime from the church, for instance, it is a sacrilege, but it is only a venial sacrilege, in addition to being a venial sin of theft. When the theft or violation of a sacred place, object or person is gross, it is a mortal sin.

When we speak of sacrilege we ordinarily have in mind the unworthy reception of a sacrament. You receive a sacrament unworthily when you wilfully lack the qualities that are essential to its valid or rightful reception. A sacrilege is committed for instance, when an adult receives baptism without faith or sorrow for sin; when a Catholic goes to confession and is grossly neglectful in examining his conscience, so that, through his own fault, he omits the mention of mortal sins; when he wilfully conceals a mortal sin, or has no true sorrow for his sins; when he is minded from the start not to perform the penance given him, and yet he allows the priest to impart absolution to him. If the penitent has the will to recite his penance when he gets absolution, the sacrament is worthily received, all other requirements being fulfilled. If later on he neglects to say a considerable penance, or a large

part of it, he commits a mortal sin. The neglect of a slight penance, or of a small part of a large penance, is a venial sin. Whoever wilfully receives any of the remaining five sacraments in the state of mortal sin also commits a grievous sacrilege.

No Reason to Despair

While the unworthy reception of a sacrament is seriously sacrilegious, it is yet not the worst or greatest sin a person can be guilty of; and after its perpetration, no matter how often and in what fashion it was done, there is no reason at all for the culprit to despair of God's pardon and to fall a prey to despondency. One act of perfect contrition, which will be explained at length later on, will at once cleanse the soul of these as well as of all other sins. This act implies the will to make a clean breast of every grievous sin, inclusive of the sacrileges, in confession when the opportunity presents itself.

Nor is there any need of being ashamed or afraid of making this revelation to the priest. There is hardly a confession that consoles the priest more than the penitent and sincere adjustment of past unworthy confessions and Communions. Even as our Lord restored life to Lazarus after he had been dead four days and his body had already begun to grow corrupt, so the priest in a way feels more than ever the greatness

of his sacerdotal power when he can recall to supernatural life a soul that seemed to be hopelessly dead and in a state of spiritual lethargy and putridity. Then, too, as was said in a previous chapter, human nature is quite uniform even in its spiritual manifestations; hence you need not shrink from the ordeal of this confession, as though you were the only one who was ever under the necessity of making it. The priest is well acquainted with this form of human misery also.

The Priest Feels Humiliated

For another more personal reason the priest derives consolation from the confession of a great but truly repentant sinner. Every now and then the priest is thoroughly humiliated and, in a way, disheartened in the confessional. Men and women, young and old, of every walk of life come to him and often reveal to him indirectly a life of great sanctity and sublime love of God. Against their life he feels that his own life is mean, commonplace, deficient and disappointing as far as the practice of virtue and piety is concerned. He wonders how they can be holy when he is not; how they can abound in the same virtues in which he knows he is wanting; and how they with less graces than he can love God so much when he loves Him so little. This is a continuous source of self-reproach and discomfiture to the true priest of God.

When, then, one comes to him who has been a great sinner, but who, yielding to God's grace, of a sudden becomes a great saint through genuine penance and self-hatred, the priest takes heart and conceives new hope for himself, and trusts that God will forgive him all his offenses too, and receive him, contrite and crushed with self-detestation, in His sweet grace, and benevolent friendship, and abiding love.

The Natural Fast

Another phase of sacrilege deserves mention here. It is the deliberate unworthy reception of holy Communion in a non-fasting condition. Whenever a healthy person receives holy Communion he is expected to observe the natural fast from the previous midnight. The natural fast means the abstention from taking food or drink by way of nourishment. If one inadvertently breaks his fast and is aware of it, he may not receive holy Communion on that day. If he nevertheless communicates, he is guilty of a grievous sacrilege, unless a serious reason justifies him in going to Communion anyway in spite of having broken his fast.

Say a young man was to be married at Mass at which he and his bride and the entire party were to receive holy Communion, as is a pious Catholic custom. Unwittingly he would drink water the morning of his wedding day before the ceremony.

Would he be allowed to receive holy Communion nevertheless? If he submitted this matter to the priest, and if it was not publicly known that he broke his fast, I believe the priest would allow him to receive. It might create an unfavorable impression if he did not receive with the bride and the others; and again it would be a considerable hardship for him to abstain from holy Communion on the great day of his wedding. Hence it seems the priest would declare he could go to holy Communion. But each such or similar case would have to be submitted to the priest to be judged by its own merits.

The Church Is Considerate

Today the Church has moderated considerably her former rigid discipline in regard to the natural fast before the reception of holy Communion. People who, after having been sick for a month, have no certain hope of a speedy recovery, may upon the prudent advice of their confessor receive holy Communion once or twice a week, even if before Communion they take medicine in liquid or solid form, or liquid nourishment, such as milk, coffee or broth. Provided this nourishment is wholly in a fluid state, it does not matter if some solid food, bread, for instance, has been mixed with it. It is superfluous to remark that they who are sick to die may receive Communion, or Viaticum, every day, and at any hour of the day or night, in a non-fasting condition.

In Case of Doubt

Whoever doubts whether he has broken his natural fast, either because he does not know for certain if he took something by way of nourishment or not, or because he does not know for sure whether he took it after or before midnight, may receive holy Communion without fear or hesitation. If two kinds of time are in vogue in a territory, the standard and the advanced or summer time, one may be guided by either in the computation of midnight.

It is perfectly legitimate and quite proper to cleanse the teeth or rinse the mouth before holy Communion. Nor need one worry lest in the process a drop or two of water may have remained in his mouth or may even have been swallowed with the saliva. For under the supposition it was not taken and intentionally swallowed by way of nourishment. The same applies if in winter in a snow flurry a flake or two of snow would enter the mouth and mingle with the saliva. In such and similar cases one is not bound, as some scrupulous people do, to spit the mouth dry. While it is laudable to be conscientious in the observance of laws, it is neither laudable nor wise to stretch them to a pass they were never intended to cover, and thereby to render them either impossible of or ridiculous in their observance. Here, too, St. Peter exhorts us, saying: "Be sober" (1 Peter, 5, 8).

CHAPTER XIII.

The Second Commandment

Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain.

THE sins against this commandment are blasphemy, cursing and swearing or, as it is ordinarily called, profanity, the irreverent use of the Name of God or other sacred names, perjury, and the violation of an oath or a vow. Blasphemy is an injurious utterance against God, or sacred persons, places or things. Of itself blasphemy is a mortal sin, containing as it does a serious offense of God. At times, however, blasphemous expressions are not meant by the speakers as they sound, and for this reason, unless there be grievous scandal given, they may in certain cases not be mortal sins.

Blasphemous Utterances

If one said, for instance, that God was not just or fair; or that He had no care of His creatures; or that He was unconcerned no matter how much and in what manner they suffered: if he meant this, it would be a mortal sin of blasphemy: for if God is not just or fair or fatherly, He is not God.

And what injury could be greater than to say of God that He is in reality not God? But many people who, in moments of trouble, depression and discouragement make the aforesaid or similar statements, frequently do not attend to the meaning of them, or do not really mean what they say; they merely want to give vent to their mood of despondency and pusillanimity: hence they are hardly guilty of mortal sin. Even at that their manner of easing their minds is most ill-chosen and unhappy, and not at all calculated to win them the favor, protection and blessing of God, Who alone can help them in the troubles that actuate them to speak with disrespect against Him.

Cursing and Swearing

To curse, in the strict theological sense, means to wish someone evil. In the ordinary conventional sense cursing and swearing are used synonymously, and mean profanity, or the abuse of God's Name or, anyway, of some sacred reference, to express a vehement feeling of anger, surprise, or some kindred passion. If the curse is meant just as it sounds, and it expresses the wishing of a serious evil upon another, it is a mortal sin against charity. Take, for example, the very ordinary American curse: "God damn you." If one meant this imprecation as he hurled it at another, he would be wishing the greatest possible

evil upon him, namely that God should consign him to hell forever.

Yet many of those who utter this terrible curse do not mean it at all, and they would not like to see it executed for any consideration whatever in the case in which they use it. They employ it in fits of anger or irritation against the persons they love most in the world: against wife or husband; against parents or children; against brother or sister: and it is farthest removed from their minds to wish the addressees real harm of any kind: and they themselves would be tremendously afflicted if in consequence of their curse, or irrespectively of it, any evil befell their dear ones. In view of this their curse is in itself not a mortal sin, although it may under the circumstances involve a mortal sin of scandal; especially if spoken by parents before their children. At any rate it is a serious venial sin, implying as it does an abuse of God's holy Name.

Vulgar Words

Certain expressions that are commonly used, such as "darn it," "the darned thing," "by gosh," "by golly," "jimenie," "ye gods," "the dickens," "the deuce," may be reminiscent of certain forms of profanity and may therefore not be at all nice words to say: yet they are not curse words, and should not be confessed as such. Merely to say "O hell", or "the devil", or even "damn it",

without any particular reference, is not cursing either, but the use of these words is quite inelegant, unbecoming and vulgar. It is a different matter, of course, if one really meaning it, says: "Go to hell!" or, "Go to the devil," for these expressions contain real curses.

By way of injecting a bit of pleasantry into our serious subject, I recall a little story told me some time ago. A Scotch minister was to preach on the words of St. Peter: "Be sober and watch: because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, goeth about seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter, 5, 8). The Scotch are said to have a propensity for superfluously repeating the personal pronouns. They like to say, for instance: "John, *he* went," instead of saying "John went". The aforesaid minister had this weakness in a marked degree. As he began his sermon, after quoting the text, he spoke as follows:

All About the Devil

"My dear brethren, to derive all the benefit from this advice of the Scriptures, we are going to consider three things with reference to it: First, who the devil *he* is; second, where the devil *he* is going; and third, what the devil *he* is roaring about." The minister's manner merely sounded profane. In reality it was not. But he should have used correct grammar.

They say there is no country in the world in which ordinary profanity, or cursing and swearing, is so universal as in the United States of America. Other countries there are where horrid blasphemy may be more in vogue, proportionately: but nowhere in all the world is God's holy Name so commonly, vulgarly and frequently abused as in our glorious country of the Stars and Stripes: in many ways the country most favored and blessed by God. We have every reason to be ashamed of this inglorious eminence and shameful distinction.

Catholics and the Holy Name

We Catholics, far from contributing to this godless habit, should do all in our power to stem, discourage and frown it out of countenance entirely. Hence we should above all aim never to speak the holy Name of God, Lord and Jesus Christ without the proper reverence ourselves, and forbid, as far as in us lies, the abuse of these sacred Names on the part of others. If you have authority over those that transgress in this regard, either because they are your charges or you have jurisdiction over the place in which this sinful speech is indulged in: it will be your part to call the transgressors to task in no unmistakable terms. You will do this also in many other instances in which your only but sufficient warrant for giving the rebuke will be your presence in the

company in which this unseemly talk takes place. You have a right to demand that where you are your presence and your religious sensibilities should be duly respected, let alone not insolently jarred and violated.

Their Vocabulary Is Meager

Persons who are given to profanity in their conversation are usually devoid of a reasonable use of the English language, which induces them to use as expletives and means of emphasis the holy Names of God or other sacred persons or objects for which there is absolutely no call, and the use of which merely betrays their very limited vocabulary and their gross awkwardness in cultured speech. Moreover, in cursing other persons, animals or things, they usually beg for an alibi for their own clumsiness and maladroitness. In addition they show a decided want of good breeding for having so little regard for the sacred feelings of others to whom they are speaking, or who may be within the radius of their foul and profane voice. Finally they betray an entire lack of the fine feeling of reverence for the holy Names of God which every genuine Christian should possess and by which he should always be guided in his conversation. Here the insertion is in place that, to promote great reverence in himself and others for God's holy Names, every Catholic man and young man in our country is glad

to join and proud to be a member of the splendid Holy Name Society.

The Doctor Cured Her

Of Dr. Johnson, the English literary critic, they tell the story of how he cured a woman of the fish market of a vicious case of profanity and ribaldry. Everybody feared her malicious and venomous tongue, for which she was known throughout the city of London. Dr. Johnson, hearing of her propensity for cursing and calling others ugly names, undertook to cure her. He approached her at the market and asked the price of the fish she was selling. He pretended to consider her prices exorbitant and shameful, when of a sudden she launched out into a fierce diatribe and a furious philippic. No curse was too horrid and no name too vile to be hurled at him without mercy and regard.

The doctor maintained his equanimity and composure. Very quietly he retaliated and for every epithet of his antagonist he returned an epithet of his own. He began by using the forms and figures of speech and punctuation, with which the illiterate woman was altogether unacquainted, and the meaning of which she was unaware of. In turn he called her an apostrophe, an ellipsis, a parenthesis, an interrogation, a hyphen, a semi-colon, etc. She finally run out of epithets when he was still going strong, and the

more he said the weirder they sounded. This soon infuriated her to such a degree that she could no longer contain herself in her wrath. She threw herself hysterically into the street and rolled about frantically for sheer anger. When she came to, however, she saw into the folly of her manner, and resolved never to indulge it again.

It might not be a bad counsel for some of our Catholic people to try to cure themselves of the ugly habit of profanity by substituting some of Dr. Johnson's words for their un-Christian oaths and curses. They would sound better, and would at least be a sort of a lesson in language to both speakers and listeners, and thus be productive of some good.

Everybody Was Damned

They tell the story of Dean Swift, a Protestant minister, that one day a prominent man, who had contracted the ugly habit of continuous profanity, spoke to his Reverence in his usual manner, interspersing his speech with the word "damned" very profusely. The minister felt the disregard which was thereby paid to his station, and he called the guilty one to task, saying: "From now on I shall know that everyone and everything you speak about is 'damned'; hence you need not remind me of it in every instance."

It is idle and puerile for a Catholic to say in excuse of his unholy habit of speech that he curses

without being aware of it; that he really means no harm by it; and that try as he may he can not overcome his evil custom, since the words escape him as it were against his will. If one has progressed to this degree of cursing he proves first, that he has been cursing a long time without restraint. In the beginning he must have felt considerable remorse about it, for it is not natural for a Christian to fall into the way of profanity without many pointed and severe rebukes of conscience. In the next place, even if the person who is an habitual curser flatters himself that he intends no harm by it, there is still much harm done by the very irreverence his speech contains against God and His holy Names, and also by the scandal thereby given to others, and by the endorsement that is thus added to our disgraceful American distinction of excelling all the nations of the world in coarse and vulgar profanity.

How would you like it, if someone contracted the habit of using your or your parents' names as mere expletives, or to show how surprised, angry, or indignant he was? And how would you fancy the manner of a man who had accustomed himself to punching your face every time he met you, even though he would assure you that it was just his way, and that he meant no harm whatever by it? God was most sensitive regarding even the reverent use of His holy Name in the Old Law. He will therefore not be insensible to any irreverent use of it in the New Law.

A Nun's Cure for Profanity

In one of our Catholic hospitals a Sister was charged with the case of a patient, who was gruesomely addicted to cursing. After he had forgotten himself and uttered several horrid oaths in her presence, she chided him suavely yet sternly, forbidding him any further use of such unseemly language under pain of dismissing his case from her charge. He did not want to lose her as his nurse by any means; so he promised her to reform. But how was he to go about it? She told him.

He had considerable money. She asked him, as she handed him a small bank, to deposit a ten cent piece in it for every profanity that would escape him. He cheerfully promised. Sooner than he expected he had to drop the first dime. Not long after he had to drop the second and the third. As he saw his money thus slipping away from him rather fast, he felt he had to be careful. And it was not long before he was entirely cured of his disedifying habit. No matter how ingrained a trait of cursing a person may have, this scheme of the good Sister, if rigidly pursued, will overcome it in very short order in every instance.

He Can Quit Cursing

Moreover, who says that with the best of will he can not overcome his weakness for cursing belies his own words whenever he is in the com-

pany of certain persons, strangers, for instance, or ladies, upon whom he is eager to make a good impression. He then abstains scrupulously and consistently from every profane insertion in his speech. This demonstrates conclusively that he can guard himself against swearing and cursing whenever he so chooses. Why can he not do from the mere regard for God and his soul what he does so readily and easily from human respect?

There is a touch of humor and at the same time a sound moral lesson in the story of a crowded street car on which were riding a minister, an Irishman and a young girl of about twelve years. The car happened to come to a sudden stop when someone stepped on the little girl's foot. "Darn it, anyhow," she cried out with pain. The minister rebuked her for using such profanity which, he said, was not at all proper, particularly not for a nice little girl as she was. He gave her fifteen cents, bidding her to let the money remind her that she must never again use such unbecoming language.

A Strong Word

The Irishman observed this procedure with interest, when there was another jolt and someone stepped heavily on his toes. "Begorra," he said, turning full towards the minister, "I have a word in my mouth that is worth at least two dollars and twenty-five cents." But the minister did

not connect with the appeal. What the word was, the Irishman did not say. But every restrained curse or profanity is worth more than any amount of money to the one who for the love of God and his soul refuses to utter it.

A young man related in my presence that he was playing a game of ball on a Saturday afternoon. When it was over he told his pal, a fellow of his own age, that he had to go to church, for he wanted to go to confession. At this remark his companion said: "Oh, it has been years and years since I have gone to confession. I really ought to go, and I should like to go again, too. But I have not gone since I received my first holy Communion, and I really have forgotten how to go." His friend then undertook to recall to him in general the method of going to confession, saying all he had to do was to tell his sins and their number to the priest, as well as he knew how, and then, if he was sorry for his sins and minded to lead a good life in the future, all his sins would be forgiven him. This rather reassured him and he was prevailed upon to go to confession at once.

A Tremendous Number of Curses

There were many penitents in the church, and when the one time slacker's turn came to confess, he was apparently nervous in the confessional, and he spoke in such a loud tone of voice that everyone in church could hear what he was saying.

He had evidently nursed a strong habit of cursing, and when he came to confess this, instead of saying about how often he had cursed each day, he had computed the entire number, and in the same loud tone of voice he said: "I cursed 1,589,365 times." The crowd outside, embarrassed as everyone felt, broke into an audible laughter at the immense and precise sum of curses.

If some of our Catholic men and young men and, alas, even some of our Catholic ladies, young and old, would undertake to keep a close count of all their profanities, or irreverent references to God or the Lord, they, too, would be staggered by the volume of them. And even our Catholic children are not immune from this godless habit. But almost in every case, in which a Catholic child is found to be an adept at cursing, it has acquired the habit from its parents or older brothers or sisters.

Some Curser

It is an old story of the little boy who in spite of his tiny age had already learned to curse enormously. A casual visitor hearing him curse ferociously made the remark: "My boy, you certainly know how to curse." The boy felt complimented and replied rather modestly: "That's nothing. You ought to hear the old man. He's some curser for you." No wonder the poor boy was beguiled into the same misconduct.

Catholic parents who curse do not as a rule give this angle of their ungodly behavior sufficient consideration. If they did, they would shrink from the terrible responsibility with which they are now burdening their conscience through this scandal to their children.

He Almost Cursed

A Protestant young couple, having a very bright son of six years, moved into a fashionable neighborhood. The ladies of the vicinity told the young woman that their minister was very much alive and active, and would no doubt visit the new family in his parish very soon. They informed her, too, that he had a habit of taking up a sort of a census at once, in the course of which he always asked certain definite questions of each member of the family. To a boy, for instance, he would say: "Hello, my boy. What is your name? How old are you? Where do bad boys, who lie, smoke and steal, go?"

The young mother remembered these questions carefully, intending to drill her little son in answering them so well that he would make a favorable impression on the minister when he came. Again and again she quizzed him, saying: "Hello, my boy. What is your name?" The boy replied: "Johnnie." She went on: "How old are you?" He answered: "Six years old." She continued: "Where do bad boys, who lie, smoke

and steal, go?" He rejoined: "They go to hell." She was much pleased as he succeeded in getting these answers perfectly. The minister would feel, as he heard the boy reply so alertly, that he was the brightest boy he had ever met, the mother was convinced.

It was not long when the minister, bland and smiling, put in his appearance. He asked the woman the ordinary questions he addressed to the mother of a family. Presently the boy entered the room without knowing who was there. The minister at once accosted him most suavely, saying: "Hello, my boy. What is your name?" The lad was nervous and answered rapidly: "Johnnie. Six years old. Go to hell." He did not mean it as badly as it sounded.

The Parrot Grows Profane

Some kind benefactor had given the Sisters of a parish school a clever young parrot that was quick in learning and ready in repeating the words and phrases which it heard. The Sisters had a great deal of innocent pastime with the bird. They taught it with remarkable success to say plainly for instance: "Blessed be God," "Blessed be Jesus Christ," "Ave Maria," etc. When they reported this to the Mother Provincial, she asked them to send the wondrous bird to the novitiate for the entertainment and edification of the novices. The Sisters gladly and proudly complied with this request.

But lo and behold, when the parrot arrived in the novitiate and all the novices and other Sisters gathered about to hear its words of piety, the bird began to utter ugly curses and imprecations in quick succession and with much emphasis. Everyone was shocked beyond words. What had happened? In the baggage car on the way to the novitiate the parrot had to listen for hours to the cursing and swearing of one or the other of the baggage men. It forgot all the pious words, and retained the use of the curse words.

If Parents But Reflected

This may be a mere story; but even if it is it contains a wholesome lesson for parents to be careful of their speech in the presence of their children who particularly in their younger years, are very imitative, receptive and retentive. They easily and tenaciously absorb certain expressions, especially when they are spoken by their parents with emphasis and force, and not without a certain air of false courage and affected bravery. All the pious words, phrases and prayers the children have learned in church or school must make room, in their preference, for the use of the curses and imprecations they hear from their parents day for day. One such profane expression, heard possibly but once, may imbed itself in the child's mind for life, and may be repeated by it to God's dishonor no one can

calculate how often. And the habit of it may be transmitted into countless generations. Imagine the terrific responsibility of him who started all this religious obliquity in dishonor of God's holy Name.

The Pebbles Increased

It may have the mark of unreality upon it, yet the following story, too, contains a moral. A man after a long interval came to confession one day. Among other things he pleaded guilty of having cursed. The priest asked him how often he cursed. The penitent answered that he did not remember more than that he cursed quite often. The confessor impressed upon him his sacred duty of discontinuing the sinful habit completely once for all; at the same time he warned him that, if he ever had the misfortune to lapse into cursing again, he should put a pebble into his pocket for each curse he uttered, so that at his next confession he would know distinctly just how often he violated the Second Commandment of God. The sinner promised he would do as he was told, and he was given the holy absolution.

Months and months passed when on a certain Saturday evening, on which many people were standing in line to go to confession to the afore-said priest, there was heard a great noise right outside the confessional. The priest was shocked

and, as he looked out of the confessional, he saw his former penitent holding in his hand a large sack of stones which he had just deposited on the floor with much racket. When the priest asked him what he intended doing in bringing those stones in the church, the man replied: "Father, these are the pebbles you told me to gather every time I cursed. I got a whole wagon-load of them outside. Please tell me where to put them." This is ludicrous, in a way; but it will not be at all ludicrous, or a laughing matter, for anyone to appear before the judgment seat of God with a heavy load of godless oaths and imprecations telling against him.

The Words Froze

Another ancient yarn is that of mariners and travellers coursing in one of the far northern seas. They were overcome by the winter and were stuck in the ice for months. It was so cold that the words froze no sooner they were uttered, and consequently became inaudible. One of the party who was much addicted to cursing had been trying to restrain his bad habit for propriety sake. But when he noticed the phenomenon of spoken words freezing and becoming inaudible at once, he took a delight in speaking in great profusion and variety all the curses he could possibly think of in the presence of the rest, since he was sure no one heard them anyway.

His discomfiture was great, however, when the ice began to thaw and the crew was making preparations to move the ship. All his frozen oaths of a sudden came to life, as it were, as one thawed after the other, and the individual curses, in the tone and temper of his voice, were distinctly heard by the entire company, much to the shame and derision of the guilty one.

The moral of this story is, that many Catholics who now curse wantonly, and at times even grievously, and who make no more of their curses once they are pronounced, as if that was the end of them, will be in a terrible predicament and agonizing confusion when they stand before God's tribunal to be tried for eternity, and each one of their profane and ungodly utterances will be repeated clearly and horridly in testimony against them.

A Man of Faith

Infinitely more encouraging and exhilarating is the story of the splendid Catholic man who was on the point of being operated on for a diseased tongue. His wife and children were present. Before the surgeon proceeded to the operation he suggested to his patient that, if he had anything to say to his wife and children, he had better say it then and there, as he would never again be able to speak a single word after the operation. When the man heard this sad news, he asked pen-

sively: "Doctor, is this going to be my last word on earth?" "Positively!" was the answer of the physician, who expected his patient would then launch into a pathetic address to his dear ones. Instead of that, however, the good man merely exclaimed with all his heart and soul: "Praised be Jesus Christ!" It was his last word in this life.

When this man appears in judgment he will in all likelihood fare very nicely because of his great love and tender reverence for the sweet and adorable Name of Jesus. "For there is no other Name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts, 4, 12). "God hath given Him a Name which is above all names: that in the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father" (Philipp., 2, 9-12). It is to fare similarly in judgment that so many of our Catholic men and young men join and faithfully live up to the rules of the excellent Holy Name Society.

The False Oath

To commit perjury, or to swear falsely, is of itself always a mortal sin. Whenever we swear, or take an oath, we thereby solemnly call God to witness that what we are saying is, as far as we know, the truth. If at the same time we are conscious that what we are swearing to is false,

we thereby invoke God's testimony in favor of a lie, and consequently make Him out a liar; which is grievous irreverence. Nor does it matter whether perjury is committed in or outside of court: it is always seriously sinful. If through perjury we have violated justice and hurt the cause of another, we are bound in conscience to restore the damage.

If one swears to the truth, but without sufficient warrant for an oath, since the matter in question does not call for or justify its use at all, he commits a venial sin of disrespect to God, for calling upon Him frivolously to substantiate certain sayings. If one in good faith makes a promise under oath, and breaks this promise without sufficient grounds, he commits a mortal sin, if the matter in consideration is of great importance. If there is question only of some insignificant or slight affair, the breaking of the oath is a venial sin.

Vows

What has just been said relatively to the keeping of oaths also applies in a similar manner to vows. A vow is a definite promise to God to do something good and pleasing in His honor, directly or indirectly. The one who makes this promise understands that he is binding himself in conscience, or under sin, to its keeping. If one has not this mind and will to bind himself in con-

science, he is merely making a resolution, or giving his word of honor to God—as we do for instance when at confession we promise God never to sin again—but he is not making a vow. If the vow refers to something of importance, and the one who made it did not specify otherwise, it binds under mortal sin; if it involves only some light matter, it binds under venial sin. Of course, if there is a sufficient reason for not keeping a vow in a given case, no sin is committed.

If one is in doubt whether what he promised or resolved to do was a vow or not, he may assume that it was not; for a vow must be so deliberately and consciously contracted or made, that the one who makes it is fully and indubiously aware that he is binding himself under vow. If he is not so aware, but some sincere doubt still lingers in his mind about the matter, he is not to consider himself bound in conscience. The same is true if he doubts whether the condition, on which the vow depended, was really fulfilled. As long as there is room for a reasonable doubt in the matter, he is not bound by the vow.

Go Slow as to Vows

Devout persons, especially those of the so-called pious sex, should be very slow and deliberate in making vows of a serious nature. It is easy in times of great distress, real or imaginary, to be quick in making big vows: to say, for instance,

as some do: "O Lord, if you grant me this or that favor, I will never eat a bite of meat again;" or, "I will say the rosary every day of my life;" or, "I will never marry;" or, "I will go to the convent," etc. Easy as it is to speak such vows, so hard it often is to keep them.

Prudent persons, therefore, never make vows of great import without pondering over the matter long, soberly and carefully, and never without getting the consent of their confessor or spiritual director to make them. The priest will guide them wisely. He knows from the experience of his ministry how much spiritual trouble and embarrassment—not to speak of sins—are caused by ill-advised and hasty vows. Ordinarily it is preferable merely to make a decided resolution, or to give your word of honor, to do this or that, with the explicit understanding, however, that you are not taking a vow. Then your conscience will not so easily become heavily encumbered and, perhaps, sadly involved.

A Rosary a Day

St. Francis de Sales was a very holy man, who had an unusual gift of prayer. Yet he tells us that later in life he often regretted having in his younger years made a vow to say the rosary every day, for at times the fulfillment of this vow created considerable difficulty to him. Alas, there are ever so many persons who made conse-

quential vows in some duress, but who have not kept them and are not keeping them today. In certain instances their keeping is simply impossible; hence it is no sin. In other cases, however, this impossibility is not so apparent, and yet they who vowed neglect the promises they have made, not without annoyance and discomfort of conscience. In case they can still keep their vows without great inconvenience, they should keep them by all means, for "it is much better not to vow, than after a vow not to perform the things promised" (Eccl., 5, 4).

Ask the Priest

If the vow is impossible, or if its keeping is connected with serious inconvenience, the party in question should ask the confessor in the next confession for a dispensation from it, or for its commutation into some other work. There is no reason to be shy about submitting such a case to the confessor, since it is by no means anything new or unheard-of, but rather of frequent occurrence. Since the confessional, by the way, is so available as a complete information bureau in spiritual matters, it is a pity that so many of our good Catholics, rather than take heart to submit their doubts and fears to it betimes, live on in dampening and benumbing doubt, fear and trepidation of spirit for years and years.

Not only is the confessional a spiritual information bureau, but also a spiritual insolvency or bankruptcy court. In other words, if the penitent is spiritually bankrupt and can not meet his obligations by keeping certain vows he has made, either because he assumed too much in the beginning, or the vow was rendered much harder through later developments, the confessor, by virtue of his ordinary or delegated faculties, can release him from his obligations entirely, or impose some other feasible work in exchange. Much more, of course, as has been remarked in a previous chapter, does the confessional function as a spiritual insolvency court, when in it the sincere and penitent sinner, who has contracted vast debts against God, which of himself he could never liquidate, is at once and forever absolved from all his sins. Not only are his debts remitted, but all his past merits, forfeited through sin, are restored to him again, with the addition of the newly acquired merits of a good confession. Indeed, "one is good, God" (Matt., 19, 17).

CHAPTER XIV.

The Third Commandment

Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day.

THE Third Commandment of God is elucidated and reinforced by the First Commandment of the Church which enjoins upon all Catholics to hear Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation. In the United States of America there are six holydays of obligation. They are Christmas (December 25), the Circumcision (January 1), the Ascension of our Lord, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (August 15), the Immaculate Conception (December 8), and the feast of All Saints (November 1).

The Obligatory Mass

On all the Sundays of the year and the aforesaid holydays, Catholics, beginning with children seven years of age—children under seven are not yet bound by the laws of the Church—are obliged to hear holy Mass and to abstain from servile work. Whoever, then, through his own fault either misses holy Mass entirely, or a large or important part of it, on these days, is guilty of mortal sin. To neglect any one of the three

constituent parts of Mass: offertory, consecration, or communion, is a grievous sin. If one missed all of the Mass that precedes the offertory and also all of the Mass that follows communion, he, too, would commit a mortal sin. For even though in the supposition he was present at the three principal parts of Mass, he nevertheless neglected a large portion of it.

There are certain reasons that exempt Catholics from the obligation of hearing Mass on the aforesaid days, and there are other reasons for which they can procure a dispensation from the law in a given instance from their pastors. No one is obligated to hear Mass at the price of great inconvenience, or against a serious handicap. Whenever, then, it is clear that such a grievous inconvenience exists, the person affected by it is by that very fact exempt from the law, and need not hear Mass. If there is a reasonable doubt whether the inconvenience is great enough to warrant exemption, there is room for dispensation. Every pastor has the power to give this dispensation, when he so thinks fit, in individual cases. Nowadays, it is ordinarily not hard to get in touch with the pastor at short notice, and apply for the dispensation in dubious circumstances. Rather apply, if possible, than stay away from Mass with a doubtful conscience.

Dispensation

Once the pastor or some other authorized priest has given a dispensation regarding the law of Sunday and holyday Mass—and the same applies to the law prohibiting servile work on these days, and the laws of abstinence and fasting—the dispensation is valid as long as the reason, why it was given, endures. There is therefore no need of repeating the request for it, unless the one who gave the dispensation so specified in granting it. This holds good, too, regarding a declaration of the confessor on these and similar obligations.

The reasons productive of exemption and dispensation are various, and it is impossible to quote them all. Some of the more ordinary reasons are sickness, the duty of staying with a sick person, very inclement weather, very difficult roads, a long distance from church without such means of transportation that would minimize the distance, a serious danger of contracting an illness or relapsing into it, etc. If one were so devoid of decent clothing that the attendance at Mass would necessarily be associated with great embarrassment, he would be excused. The Church is a very considerate mother and does not aim to embarrass her children or expose them to serious discomfort through her laws. These laws must therefore be interpreted in this light always. On the other hand, her children should

behave towards her with sincerity, and not feign to have, or make themselves believe they have, reasons for exemption or dispensation, when in reality they have none and know they have none.

A Gay Party

A good way ordinarily to satisfy oneself as to the legitimacy of the reasons that tempt one to remain away from holy Mass, is to ask oneself in all candor: "If instead of to Mass I were invited to a gay party, a jolly dance, a wedding, a show, or a ride, which I was very eager to attend: would this particular situation, this weather, or indisposition, or whatever else is trying to suggest that I stay away from Mass, keep me from going to that merry affair?" If in your heart you would have to answer: "Indeed, it would not; I should go in spite of it:" then you ought to go to Mass, too. But if you could sincerely say: "No matter how eager I was to go to such a festivity, I am sure I should not go under these conditions:" then it seems evident that you are not bound to go to Mass either.

Conscientious Catholics are so sensitive about missing Mass, that even when they are duly hindered from going to Mass they are not at rest unless they mention it in confession. They know they committed no sin, and they tell the priest the circumstances: but somehow they want to make sure that they are retaining their

delicacy of conscience regarding their Sunday duty, and are not in danger of growing careless or of taking undue liberties in so important a matter. Their edifying attitude ought to stimulate lax and indifferent Catholics to a finer sense of duty and a greater concern about their salvation in this highly consequential matter of religious worship.

The Value of Holy Mass

Holy Mass is nothing less than a re-presentation of the work of our redemption on the Cross, or of the death of Jesus on the Cross for us. Close attachment to and observance of it, therefore, is the best warrant of one's own redemption: whereas indifference to and neglect of it easily and readily invite apostasy from God, grace and salvation.

Most Catholics who lose the faith entirely and permanently forfeit it through their cold, ingrate and sinful omission of holy Mass. This accounts for the generally observed fact, that fervent Catholics, whenever they are in straits with reference to holy Mass, are not nearly so eager to find reasons that will exempt them from the obligation as they are to find reasons to go to Mass in the face of dissuading difficulties. Their love for the Holy Sacrifice makes them wondrously resourceful and inventive. Somehow they manage to get to Mass in circumstances that seem to

preclude every possibility of attendance. Love knows and finds a way. True love is not easily daunted. And their love for holy Mass is staunch and true. They are the ones whom God rewards with the wondrous gift of an abiding Catholic faith for themselves, their children and children's children.

It Is Good to Alternate

When for domestic reasons only some of the members can attend Mass each Sunday: either because the means of transportation will not accommodate all, or someone has to stay at home with a sick person, or with the small children, etc., the best must be made of the situation. In case there is more than one Mass in the church, it may be possible to make the trip twice and bring all the members of the family to church. If this can not be done, it would be inadvisable, if the same person stayed away from Mass every Sunday, allowing the others to go. It is better to alternate, so that no one misses Mass for a considerable length of time. A long absence, though apparently justified, easily begets spiritual alienation from Mass and consequent indifference, which is lethal.

Always Late

There are numerous Catholics who shrink instinctively from missing a serious part of Mass

through their own fault on days of obligation; yet almost every Sunday and holyday they commit a venial sin by coming late to Mass. They usually come at the epistle or gospel, or during the sermon, for no other reason but sheer indifference. They have contracted the habit of coming late, and they are making no effort to overcome it. Rather than be in church one minute before Mass starts, in order to prepare their soul to assist properly at the august sacrifice which will be immolated, they prefer to come five or ten minutes late each time. They are known and spotted for it by priest and parish. In addition to the irreverence they are thus guilty of towards the divine oblation, they give disedification and are the cause of unnecessary disturbance and distraction to the congregation. Sincere and fervent Catholics love holy Mass too much as to miss even a slight part of it through nonchalance. And they take care to come to church provided with prayerbook or rosary which will help them assist at Mass with undivided attention and devotion.

The Friar's Tenor Voice

A venerable and pious Father of our Order was the pastor of a city church. He was endowed with a melodious tenor voice which he took no little delight in using for God's honor at the altar. One day a gentleman of his parish, a wag, asked the

priest, saying: "Father, do you know what part of Holy Mass I like most to hear you sing?" The friar replied: "The preface?" The answer was, no. "The Pater Noster?" Again, no. "The Gospel?" Once more, no. The priest could not guess. The man then said: "The *Ite Missa Est*."

The priest took the joke good-naturedly. At any rate, the man in question remained in church long enough to hear the "*Ite Missa Est*": something not all Catholics have the patience to do. Many without any reason leave church regularly before Mass is over. Others stay to the end, when they leave hastily, impatiently and irreverently. Good Catholics wait until the priest retires from the altar into the sacristy; then they leave with a lingering and loving farewell to Jesus in the tabernacle.

A Hot Day

In connection with the above story I recall a ludicrous incident which happened in a church in which I ministered many years ago. It was, if I remember right, the feast of the Assumption of our Lady, a very hot day in August. The pastor, who had the High Mass, had bidden the assistant to preach very briefly because of the heat. The assistant complied with his orders, and after the short sermon the pastor intoned the Credo.

No organ sound or choir music responded to this intonation, however. The organist and a

couple of the men singers had gone to a saloon across the street as soon as the preacher mounted the pulpit. They knew nothing of the orders given for a short sermon and were leisurely quaffing a glass of beer, when all at once one of the choir members opened the door of the saloon and shouted: "Credo!" The organist hurriedly set his glass down and hastened to church to resume his work. It was the more embarrassing for him and the other delinquents since priests and people thus became aware of their custom of frequenting the saloon during the sermon. This was not an edifying practice, to say the least.

Unconscious

There being no saloons nowadays—for which we thank God from our hearts—the inducement to absent themselves from the church for the interval of the sermon is not so strong for our Catholic men and young men as it used to be. Yet there are ever so many men and women, young and old, who practically are completely absent from the sermon that is preached Sunday for Sunday. Though physically present, they are mentally unconscious, either because they sleep throughout the sermon, or because they are voluntarily distracted and pursue a train of thought or a succession of day dreams not at all in harmony with the sacred function they are

attending. If they were really in a saloon across the street from church they could not hear less of the sermon than they are hearing now.

The Asperges in a Saloon

Having mentioned the saloon, I remember the unique manner of a country pastor, a very zealous man, in getting the men of his parish in church on time. Many men had the habit of congregating in a saloon across the way from the church, which stood far back in a sort of park. They would drink and confabulate, and as a rule they missed the Asperges before the High Mass, by coming during the singing of the Kyrie Eleison or Gloria.

After repeated admonitions on his part brought no results, the pastor one Sunday, noticing that the men were not in church for the sprinkling with holy water, and being convinced they needed this sprinkling more than the other members of the parish, went out of the church, vested as he was, accompanied by the altar boys, and made for the saloon. He opened the door and solemnly sprinkled the assembly of men and young men just as he did it in church. They were taken aback, of course, at this unwonted spectacle, and thrown into considerable consternation. What is more, they were on time for the Asperges in church on the following Sundays.

Abstention From Servile Work

Catholics are bidden to abstain from unnecessary servile work on Sundays and holydays of obligation. By servile work is meant the work which people, who can afford it, usually have done by hired men and women. As a rule people of the moneyed class will rather have this work done for them by others than do it themselves. Purely artistic work is not forbidden. Neither is the work that has reference to one's personal or domestic cleanliness and comfort for the day forbidden.

On Sunday one may wash himself, shave, take a bath, dust his clothes, shine his shoes, etc., without sin. And whatever is required in the way of cooking, baking and the daily cleaning of the house, is also allowed. Conscientious Catholics are not scrupulous in these matters; on the other hand they do only what is necessary on Sunday, in order not to run into a way of indifference in this momentous phase of Christian life. For instance, if they remember their shoes and clothes need a thorough cleansing, they prefer to attend to this work on Saturday rather than on Sunday.

Two Hours of Hard Work

What constitutes a grievous sin against this law of God and the Church? Theologians say if one without justification did hard manual

labor on a Sunday or holyday for the space of two hours or more, he would be guilty of mortal sin. If the labor was of a light nature, three or four hours of it would be required to make up a grievous sin. If in either case the time would be less than specified, there would be question of only venial sin; although incidentally a mortal sin might be incurred through grievous scandal. If the neighbors, for example, saw a Catholic doing hard work, without any necessity, for an hour and three quarters, they might be seriously scandalized by his breaking of the Lord's day.

There are not a few Catholics who violate the Sundays and holydays frequently, if not habitually, either in a light or serious manner, through unjustifiable servile work. They like to use the Sunday to tinker about their automobile in a manual and mechanical way for hours; to make the garden; to build or repair fences; to paint or calcimine or do other similar work about the house; to put up fruit for months ahead, etc. Such labor, unless there be a special warrant for it in a given case, is ordinarily a violation of the Sunday, and consequently sinful.

A Ridiculous Pretext

The pretext that Sunday is the only available time to do these things is ridiculous, if not irreverent. In case of great poverty there is justification for certain servile work, as shall be mentioned

presently. But for ordinary people of the middle class, as they often do, to allege necessity as the justification of their servile work on Sundays and holydays is absurd and, if they get themselves to believe it, they are victims of self-deceit. Why do they not have the work done during the week by the proper laborers, mechanics or craftsmen? They do not want to pay the price.

Which means that avarice or the greed of money is often the silent yet potent motive of sinful work on Sunday. It is apparent on the surface of it that, if Sunday work were allowed merely to save and hoard money, there would soon be little, if anything, left of the Sunday observance at all. True it is that our Lord upbraided the Pharisees for straining the Sabbath prohibition of servile work. But He by no means endorses the attitude of some of our modern Catholics who go to the other extreme, and minimize this prohibition in such a way, in their conduct at least, that it no longer has any meaning.

They Work for Pleasure

There are those, too, who say they work on Sunday for the mere pleasure of it, and not for the money consideration involved. They have become so accustomed to work that they find it hard to abstain from it even on Sunday. Besides, they add, what is one going to do all day Sunday to while the time away? It is a mistake to assume

that servile work is only then forbidden on Sunday when one does it for pay; whereas if one does it merely to be occupied with something interesting, it is not sinful. Imagine how much would be left of the Sunday observance, if this principle were generally allowed and followed? It is not the question of making a livelihood by the work or not: but it is merely the fact that something is servile work which renders it taboo on Sunday.

A Day of Rest

Sunday is intended to be a day of rest from servile work for everybody as much as possible. This rest is arranged and enjoined by the law of God for various very wholesome purposes. Yet there would be no rest if people might work anyway for the divers aforesaid reasons. Moreover, in order that the Sunday be in reality a day of rest for everyone, it must be universally observed. God intends by this law not only that the body be given the needed rest but that the mind also disencumber itself from the worries and cares of work, so that the whole man, body and soul, be relieved, refreshed and re-created by every recurring Sunday. No one gains anything, even in a material or economical way, by transgressing this law, not only because he can not expect the blessing of God upon work which He does in spite of God's ordinance, but also because he is running counter to good common sense and sound

economy by not prudently interspersing and relieving his work with the required rest.

Holydays of Obligation

What has been said of the Sunday pertains with equal force to the holydays of obligation. Outside of the two that are also civil holidays, Christmas and New Year, there are in the United States only four additional holydays of obligation throughout the entire year. No Catholic who appreciates the great and significant mysteries we commemorate on these days, which mean infinitely more to us than, for instance, the great occurrences of our national history that are celebrated on Fourth of July or Decoration Day, will consider four additional days of rest in the year excessive.

As a race the Jews are known to be keen about the acquisition and accumulation of money. Yet many orthodox Jews set a wonderful example to a number of our worldly-minded Catholics with reference to the scrupulous observance of religious holydays. These Jews not only abstain from work themselves on their annual holydays, but they close shop and suspend business entirely, no matter what gains might lure, and what profits might tempt them. Many Catholics could do the same without serious loss or difficulty on their holydays, if their conscience were only more delicate in the matter of giving to God what is

God's, and their soul less bent on accumulating the treasures which thieves approach and moths corrupt (Luke, 12, 33).

The Church Is Considerate

In saying these things there is no aim to be stricter than the Church itself. In the matter of the prohibition of servile work, too, the Church interpreting the law of God, is a tender, considerate and sympathetic mother. She does not only not expect the impossible, but she does not urge the law against a great handicap, serious inconvenience, or substantial loss. The same rule applies here, relatively, as was given in regard to the hearing of Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation. In this matter, too, the pastor is vested with the power of dispensing from the law in individual doubtful cases. Where the case of exemption from the law is clear, so that one knows he simply has to work on a Sunday or holyday for a grievous reason, as was intimated before, he does not have to refer the matter to the pastor for judgment; but when the matter is doubtful, the pastor should be approached for the necessary dispensation to ease the conscience and guard it against sin.

Get Another Job

If one is engaged in an occupation that not only compels him to work but also to miss

Mass every Sunday and holyday, he should be on the alert to exchange this occupation the sooner the better for another that is more favorable to the fulfilment of his religious duties, even if he suffers some financial loss through the change. For if one is deprived of holy Mass and the Sunday rest for a long time, even though it be through some necessity of his economical condition, he can hardly help growing less sensible of the great value of the august sacrifice in particular, and less fervent in the attachment and loyalty to his holy faith in general.

The same is to be said in regard to those Catholics who settle in districts where they have no prospect of attending Mass for an indefinite period. They may have had some vague promises as to the possibility of their going to church in the near future—since a parish would surely be started there ere long—but they were too credulous or heedless in believing these promises, and in reality after they are established there they realize there is no chance of attending to their religious duties, let alone of giving their children a good Catholic education. In consequence many lose the faith entirely for themselves and their offspring. Ordinarily they have no one to blame but themselves. Had they had the proper Catholic sense of faith and its sacred duties, their first care in migrating somewhere would have been to make sure they were to have the benefits of a

Catholic church and, respectively, of a Catholic school for their children in their new place of habitation.

Heroic Priests

Whoever is willing to work and save can make a living in more places than one in the world, and he need not for his material livelihood remain in a place in which his soul and the souls of those entrusted to his care will be starved and ruined sooner or later. Many of our most heroic priests in the United States suffer their greatest hardships in the interest of usually careless Catholics, who settle in districts devoid of a Catholic church, and incapable of supporting one. To minister to their spiritual needs anyway the priest pursues them in the midst of serious trials and at times terrific hardships.

Often these people do not deserve this attention. They wilfully and wantonly run away from the Church, as it were, into a territory into which, under the circumstances, she can not be expected to follow them. But imbued with the spirit of the Good Shepherd her priests under frightful handicaps go after these stray sheep literally over hills and mountains, and into impenetrable and inhospitable fastnesses and wildernesses, in order to reclaim and hold them close to God if at all possible. But the Catholics who inflict these burdens upon the priests are deserving of no credit.

To While the Time Away

Before dismissing this subject of Sunday observance, I beg to reply to the question mentioned above: "What is one going to do all day Sunday to while the time away?" The answer is given in the very words of the Third Commandment: "Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day." While one complies with his essential duty by attending Mass and abstaining from servile work on Sundays and holydays of obligation, a good Catholic on these days aims to dedicate the entire day as much as possible in a peculiar manner to God.

He begins with the reception of holy Communion, for which reason he usually attends an early Mass. He endeavors to return for the high Mass or parish Mass, if he has the opportunity, and to hear the sermon, which is usually longer in this Mass than in the earlier Masses. He attends the afternoon or evening services in church whenever he can do it. If he has the occasion he visits the sick, the poor and the friendless, bestowing upon them a charity that is hearty, warm and substantial. The whole day through his thoughts center particularly upon God, the saints and heaven, for whom and for which he seems to be more homesick on Sundays and holydays than at other times. He does not neglect to read the Bible and the Lives of the Saints on these days in order to soothe his homesickness and strengthen his desire to arrive in his eternal home some day.

The Sunday Is Short

Far from being long and weary, the Sunday but seems short and swift in its passing to this true disciple of Christ and son of the saints. It is like a day of spiritual retreat unto him, heartening, refreshing and inspiring him unto new religious endeavor, and towards a faster and more loving attachment to the Lord. Not as though he eschews all legitimate pleasures on these days, and is an enemy of honorable enjoyment and virtuous recreation on his own part or the part of others: but he gives a flavor of true piety to his very recreation and pastimes by directing them especially to God's honor by a good intention and, too, by the wise moderation and self-restraint with which he pursues them. He never allows them to become his main occupation or chief delight on those sacred days; but they always remain quite secondary and negligible in proportion to his chief business: the consecration of the day to the honor of the Lord. On Sundays and holydays especially he says to every observer by his genuine religious conduct: "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke, 2, 49.) How different is this attitude from the behavior of many of our modern Catholics in our pleasure-mad country! The other day I was reading about a man who was said to be every other inch a saint. Many of our so-called respectable Catholics of both sexes are Christians,

not every inch of them, but every other inch of them. They dilute their Christianity with much worldliness. If they take a look at God, their next glance is towards the world and its empty joys. Every fling towards heaven they follow up with a thrust after what the world offers them.

The Shortest Mass

This is particularly noticeable in their Sunday conduct. They would not miss Mass for the world: but they are careful to go to the shortest Mass, in which there is a brief sermon or, preferably, none at all, and they are not seen in church again throughout the day. They do not read a spiritual book, or visit the poor or the sick or those who are in prison; neither do they perform any other work of piety or charity: but they devote the entire remaining day to the pursuit of worldly and, usually, of highly selfish pleasure.

The automobile is to a great extent responsible for this ungodly practice. While it helps many people, who could not come to church at all without it, to attend Mass regularly, it on the other hand lures many Catholics irresistibly into converting every Sunday into a day of unrestrained worldly pleasure and amusement, not to mention dissipation and frivolity. The reflection has its element of peculiar sadness because of the fact that the very Catholics who are,

or at least appear to be, more blessed by God, seem to be less interested in the Christian way of keeping holy the Sabbath day than the poor and less fortunate.

The Temptation of Riches

When Catholics who, in the days of poverty and stress, were wholeheartedly devoted to God and His Church, and showed this signally by their Sunday and holyday behavior, of a sudden, when they grow prosperous, plunge into the vortex of worldly fun and sport, much to the detriment of their religious Sunday and holyday observance, we are involuntarily reminded of the words of the Apostle: "For they that will become rich fall into temptation, and into the snare of the devil, and into many unprofitable and hurtful desires which drown men into destruction and perdition. For the desire of money is the root of all evils; which some coveting have erred from the faith, and have entangled themselves in many sorrows" (1 Tim., 6, 9, 10).

But when we see Catholics in good circumstances, who could easily allow themselves every indulgence in pleasure, as far as it is a question of money, hugging God carefully and attending to His honor lovingly, we know that they do not "trust in the uncertainty of riches, but in the living God (Who giveth us abundantly all things to enjoy)"; they aim "to do good, to be rich in

good works, to give easily, to communicate to others, to lay up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on the true life" (ib., 17-19).

The Funny Papers

A little girl told her teacher how glad she was whenever Sunday came. The teacher started to be edified and asked the child why she was glad when Sunday came. "Because I can read the funny papers," the girl answered. This may be excusable in a child; but it takes on a different aspect entirely when mature Catholics of both sexes are happy when Sunday comes, not at all because they can go to holy Mass and Communion and otherwise dedicate the day to the Lord in loving worship—for they only attend to the Lord under compulsion, as it were, and with noticeable reluctance—but because they can take long automobile trips, or go fishing and hunting, or devote the entire day to sports, or to shows, dancing and other diversions.

What a Bible!

In another instance the teacher in school was telling the children how wholesome and profitable it was on Sundays to read good books, especially the Bible. One of the boys, whom the teacher expected least of all to make the declaration, volunteered to say that his parents read the Bible

regularly for hours every Sunday afternoon. She was surprised to get this notice from such a source and grew inquisitive. "Are you sure it's the Bible?" she asked the boy. "Well," the lad replied, "it is a big book, full of pictures." "What kind of pictures?" queried the teacher. The boy answered: "Rocking chairs, tables, overcoats and all kinds of things." He mistook a catalogue of a mail order house for the Bible.

In cities people do not commonly spend much time on Sundays scanning mail order catalogues. But many good hours are wasted on the Sunday papers. The Sunday newspapers of the United States, with their voluminous accessories and immense bulk, are a standing joke in the eyes of the Europeans, who look upon them as a travesty and burlesque of true journalism. Some good articles and entertaining essays or stories are no doubt found in the Sunday papers. On the other hand they induce many people to spend much valuable time on their glaring features, sensational narratives, suggestive pictures, and endless advertisements, which could be much better employed in reading some good Catholic paper, magazine or book, especially the New Testament of the Bible or the Lives of the Saints.

A Slim Attendance

In concluding this chapter I am going to relate the humorous yet sad manner of a pastor, in

whose church the Sunday afternoon and evening devotions were meagerly attended, much to the good man's sorrow and chagrin. When he announced these devotions he would at times make the publication by saying: "This afternoon," or "this evening there will be services here in church for the pastor and the janitor, for hardly anyone else attends." Did this take place in your parish church? If everyone did as you do with reference to the aforesaid services, could your pastor make a similar announcement as the priest in the story? Or are you rather one of those, as I sincerely hope, who say with the Psalmist: "I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house; and the place where Thy glory dwelleth" (Ps. 25, 8).

CHAPTER XV.

The Fourth Commandment

Honor thy father and thy mother, that thou mayest be long-lived, and that it may be well with thee.

BEFORE He delivered them to Moses for general promulgation God Himself had written the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone. On the first table were the three commandments that have reference to the worship of God. On the second table were inscribed the commandments that relate to man's moral and social conduct. The first commandment of the second table, the so-called Fourth Commandment, is: "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thou mayest be long-lived and that it may be well with thee." This commandment was given precedence over all the others of the table, because of its supreme importance, and because its observance in no slight a degree paves the way to the keeping of all the rest.

They Take God's Place

Parents, in their official capacity towards their children, take God's place and are His representatives. Their precepts, provided they are

not openly sinful, are God's precepts, and the honor that is paid them by the children redounds upon God, even as every dishonor inflicted upon them, is resented and avenged by God as though it were done to Himself. This is the only command to the observance of which is expressly attached a reward even on this earth. Inferentially this divine promise of a reward is turned into a threat of a curse from on high for those who transgress this command.

While the Fourth Commandment makes use only of the word "honor" in regard to parents, the obsequiousness of honor evidently implies obedience, respect, gratitude and love: for without the exhibition of these traits on the part of children the pretended honor shown to parents degenerates into bald mockery. A child sins against the Fourth Commandment whenever it violates the obedience, reverence and love it owes its parents. If the violation is serious, or if the child wilfully and unwarrantedly causes its parents great pain, annoyance or grief, directly or indirectly, the transgression is a mortal sin; if the violation of the honor due to parents is only slight, it constitutes a venial sin. Needless to add, that in both cases the sin may be committed in thought, word or deed, by commission or omission. It is heartrending to note how hard and unfeeling some Catholic children, single and married, are towards their needy parents.

Grievous Disobedience

A child is grievously disobedient, if it disregards outright and important commands of its parents, such as not to stay out too late at night, roaming about only God knows where; not to associate with undesirable companions; not to frequent dubious places of amusement, etc. The neglect of these and similar commands usually has the saddest consequences for the children. When parents give precepts in minor things, the neglect of them is venially sinful. If the parents merely make a request, or utter a direction, or give a counsel, without any mind to assert their authority as parents, children do not sin by not responding, just so they maintain an attitude of becoming respect for their parents.

When children are of age, and no longer count as minors before the law, but still make their home with their parents, they are bound to obey their parents in things referring to domestic order and discipline; but in their personal matters they attain a certain independence, and they are no longer bound to obey their parents with regard to them. Children who marry, or otherwise establish an independent household, are no longer under parental authority. Yet the duty to love and respect the parents remains for life, and even endures after the parents are dead.

Mental Cruelty

A child is guilty of mortal sin towards its parents if it treats them very insolently, coldly and heartlessly, in word or manner, either expressly or virtually. Children are not seldom guilty of so-called mental cruelty towards their parents. They do or say nothing to them expressly, but they act towards them in such a way, by slighting or ignoring them completely, that they cause them more ache and worry than if they called them the vilest names or slapped them in the face in public.

Perhaps older children are more likely than the younger ones to be guilty of this kind of cruelty. Married children not infrequently perpetrate it. Before marriage they did their duty by their parents; but marriage somehow changed their manner towards father and mother: it has made them selfish, haughty, overweening and snobbish. They are more or less ashamed of their parents and begin to neglect them more and more until they gradually grow apart from them entirely. They discontinue all relations with them, and pay them no homage of whatsoever kind.

The Penalty Resembles the Sin

At times children assume the same conduct because of some real or imaginary grievance they have, or think they have suffered at the hands of their parents. Instead of forgiving, as

they should, they carry a perpetual grudge against the ones to whom they owe their very existence, and behave towards them as though they meant nothing at all in their lives. God never allows such a conduct to go unpunished. And He usually punishes it after the manner of the transgression.

It is an old story, handed down from generation to generation, and thereby portraying the universal experience of mankind relative to our subject. A man had an ugly argument with his grown-up son. They hurled vile invectives at each other and called each other ugly names. They came to vicious blows. The son, being stronger than his parent, soon overcame him and had him completely at his mercy. He seized him by the head of his hair and dragged him downstairs with a view of pitching him into the gutter of the street. As they got to the foot of the stairs, however, the elder pleaded pitifully, saying: "Stop; in the Name of God, stop. Unto this very spot I dragged my father in a mean attack I made upon him one day. Now I know I am being punished by God. But do not drag me farther."

It is not often, thank God, that children outrage their parents by dragging them by the hair of their head. But ever and anon single and married children inflict severe torture upon their parents by offending or neglecting them, or by

refusing to help them when they are in actual want. These same children will experience the same or similar bitter treatment in their turn some day. It is impossible to escape the avenging hand of God. They will be dragged, speaking figuratively, by their children as far as they are now dragging their parents.

The Duty Is Bilateral

Yet children are not the only offenders against the Fourth Commandment; parents transgress it, too, in frequent instances. While the words of the commandment do not state it expressly, they virtually imply that parents are as much bound to love and to take proper care of their children, as children are bound to honor them. If they are seriously remiss in their duty, parents sin mortally; if their lack of love or care for their children is only slight, they sin venially.

It seems most unnatural, and still it is, alas, true, that even as there are children who entertain grievous hatred for their parents, so there are parents who wilfully nurse a mortal hatred for their children, which, of course, is always a serious sin. There are parents who cruelly abandon their children or allow them to suffer great want through their utter carelessness and indifference, in the corporal as well as the spiritual domain.

Not So Rare

These extreme cases, thank heaven, are rare. What is not so rare is the observation that parents are often unduly partial towards, or openly unfair and hard against, one or the other of their children. Parents are inordinately selfish at times and make demands upon their children that are unjust and cruel, whereby they often break their children's spirit, render them thoroughly unhappy, and incapacitate them for a worthwhile career in life. Parents are guilty of the same offense when they, through miserliness or some other hardness of heart, neglect to give their children a sufficient education that will qualify them to hold their own decently and successfully in the struggle for existence; or when through sheer jealousy and mean selfishness they insist that their children forego their own career and happiness in life merely to serve and gratify them. With regard to the religious education of their children parents sin by not seeing to it that their children from their tenderest age are well instructed in the theory, and solidly grounded in the practice, of their holy faith. There are ever so many cases in our country in which parents sin mortally for not sending their children to a Catholic school or college when they are well able to do so.

Against the moral education of their children parents are guilty of grievous sin when they permit their children to associate closely and

abidingly with companions that are evidently vicious or irreligious; to frequent places of amusement that are a great menace to the innocence and virtue of the young; or to stay out at night unto the most ungodly hours without supervision and restraint.

The Wholesome Rod

While there are parents who sin by too much rigor and severity towards their children, there are many more parents who sin by being over-indulgent and too soft and easy with their offspring. In the light of later developments their apparent goodness and morbid love for their children will appear to have been the greatest cruelty and disloyalty they could have perpetrated upon them. No one is a pedagogue like to God. He says emphatically: "He that spareth the rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him correcteth him betimes" (Prov., 13, 24).

What has been said about the duties of children towards their parents, applies equally to children whose parents' place is temporarily or permanently taken by a guardian, a step-parent, an aunt or elder sister or brother, who duly represents and is vested with domestic authority. These, in their turn, have similar duties towards their charges as parents have towards their children.

The Laws of the Land

The same application is to be made proportionally to the relations of pupils to their teachers, of subjects to their ecclesiastical or civil superiors, of employes to their employers, and vice-versa. Here, too, one might profitably examine himself as to his observance of the laws of the land, of his discharge of his duties as a citizen in doing his part towards providing good government by using the ballot judiciously, and by paying his taxes conscientiously.

It is impossible to go into details regarding all these and other matters of a similar nature in a book like this without rendering it over-bulky and unwieldy. I therefore beg to inform the interested readers that, if they desire more extensive information regarding the duties of parents towards each other and towards their children, and regarding children towards their parents, they will find it in the author's books entitled "Plain Talks on Marriage", and "Youth's Pathfinder", respectively.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Fifth Commandment

Thou shalt not kill.

THE Fifth Commandment above all forbids murder. Fortunately murder or homicide, in the ordinary sense of the word, is not common. Neither is suicide, the murder of oneself, frequent. The murder of unborn children is appallingly frequent, considering the horrible brutality and cruelty of it. This is dwelled on at some length in the book on Marriage, mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. It needs no further elucidation here.

But aside of real murder the Fifth Commandment forbids every wilful and unjustified injury done to our own or others' life and health. If the injury is serious it constitutes a mortal sin; otherwise it is only a venial sin. We injure our own life and health by intemperance in eating and drinking.

Complete Drunkenness

To get drunk or intoxicated through one's own fault is a mortal sin, if the drunkenness is complete; if the drunkenness is only incomplete,

it is a venial sin. Drunkenness is complete when it deprives its victim of the use of reason, so that he can no longer distinguish clearly and definitely between what is good or bad, between virtue and vice. If the drunken man is merely, as they say, hilarious and is feeling unusually good; but he still discriminates justly between what is allowed and what is not allowed: his intemperance is a venial sin.

More people are intemperate in eating than in drinking; and more people injure their health and abbreviate their life by over-eating than by over-drinking. Yet only seldom is a mortal sin done by over-indulgence in eating on the part of ordinary Catholics. Too much food does not deprive the subject of the use of reason as does too much drink. And while there is harm done to the health by excessive eating, this injury is usually caused only gradually and, as a rule, quite unconsciously. Hence to eat too much, so one feels uncomfortable and indisposed in consequence, is ordinarily only a venial sin. Scrupulous people usually do well by not considering themselves guilty in this regard; for once they start to worry about it, they feel odd and queer after every meal, not because of immoderate indulgence, but rather because of a dyspeptic condition, brought on or fostered by scrupulosity.

They Dance Too Much

We injure our health by excess in other things also. Some work or study too much or too long at a time; others dance too much; there are those, too, who sleep too much; others again sleep too little. Certain people worry too much and thereby grow so depressed and despondent that they get nervous prostration and become incapacitated to do their life's work. Besides sinning against the love they owe to themselves, they show a decided lack of trust in Divine Providence. It is seldom, however, that they are guilty of serious sin, because of the lack of sufficient advertence and consent. Theirs is usually some physical derangement bringing on a nervous depression over which they can not always achieve complete mastery. Still every sensible Christian is an enemy to undue worry.

Our Lord tells us that there is really only one thing we should worry about—"But one thing is necessary" (Luke, 10, 32)—; as to the rest, barring nothing, Jesus chides us, saying: "Why are you solicitous for the rest? Your Father knoweth that you have need of these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Luke, 12, 26, 30, 31). And even our worry relative to our salvation must not be one of dark trouble, confusion and perturbation of mind—"The Lord is not in the earthquake" (3 Kings, 19, 11)—but

rather of a certain restful anxiety, peaceful timidity and sweet solicitude, inspired and supported by a loving trust in God's goodness and mercy.

He Had Many Worries

St. Anthony of Egypt lived a most holy life in the desert. Yet he was assailed by undue cares and vexations of mind. Before he died he confessed, saying: "I have had many worries in my life, but half of them never happened." Our greatest worry is usually concerning something which either has not happened or will not happen; or it is something over which we have no control. Why, then, not let God take care of our affairs after we have attended to them as best we could, especially since he offers to give them His attention and to dispatch them to our benefit?

The Fifth Commandment not only commands us to love ourselves, but it enjoins upon us to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we deny anyone this love: in other words if we wilfully entertain thoughts of grievous hatred, revenge, jealousy or envy against our neighbor, so that we wish him serious evil, and were willing to inflict it upon him if we had the opportunity: we commit a mortal sin. Nothing that our neighbor may have done to us in the way of insult or injury can ever justify such sentiments or divest them of their gross sinfulness. Whenever these uncharitable thoughts or feelings are entertained with some

reluctance and resistance, so that the complete consent is missing, they are only venially sinful, if at all; and when they are wilfully harbored, but they refer only to slight matters, or merely represent slight ill-will or aversion, they are but venial sins.

The Bargain Is in Our Favor

As to the forgiveness of injuries, howsoever and by whomsoever inflicted, our Lord declared His mind emphatically and unmistakably when He said: "Forgive, and you shall be forgiven" (Luke, 6, 37). The bargain is altogether and very decidedly in our favor. No matter what insults and ignominies may have been heaped upon us, in proportion to our offenses against God they are insignificant and vanishing. Yet God benignly offers to forgive us all our sins if we forgive those who have injured us. This is a splendid way of obtaining the best assurance that our own sins are forgiven: by unconditionally forgiving those who have hurt us. But our forgiveness must be sincere and wholesouled. We must wish our enemies well, pray for them at least in a general way, and in case they need our help we shall render it gladly. This Jesus meant when He told us to forgive from our "hearts".

You say you are ready to forgive your enemy, but there are things he said or did against you which you can not and will not forget. This is

beyond you, you say. God does not ask you to forget, but to forgive. As long as you do this sincerely your sins, too, will be forgiven. But if you really forgive, you will spontaneously do what is in your power to forget the injuries done to you. You will never recall them to your mind willingly, or dwell upon them with a renewed feeling of having been aggrieved and hurt, let alone rehash them in your conversation with your former enemy or with others. The involuntary and passing remembrance of your injuries will but stimulate you to repeated and, if possible, increased forgiveness.

The Unwelcome Gift

Our Blessed Savior, Who died with a sweet and forceful prayer on His lips for His enemies—it was, by the way, His very first utterance on the Cross—warns us, saying: “If therefore thou offer thy gift at the altar, and there thou remember that thy brother hath anything against thee: leave there thy offering before the altar, and go first to be reconciled to thy brother: and then coming thou shalt offer thy gift” (Matt., 5, 23, 24). These lucid words tell us that God does not even welcome a gift from us if we have a wilful feeling of resentment and unforgiveness in our heart against an enemy. Much less will God be disposed to grant us the forgiveness of our own sins, when we go to confession, unless we banish

every vestige of voluntary hatred and vindictiveness from our hearts.

As to our native feeling of justice which demands that the injuries done us by others be redressed, and that their authors receive their just punishment: we need not worry on this head. God declares that He will take care of this angle of the case Himself. St. Paul says: "Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved; but give place unto wrath, for it is written: Revenge is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom., 12, 19). God will attend to a just revenge far better than we can. And since the taking of revenge is all in all a very wearisome, trying and bitter enterprise, we should thank God heartily for relieving us of it, and assuming its execution Himself.

A Sermon In Action

One of our missionaries was preaching on the forgiveness and love of enemies at a morning mission service. No sooner he ended, an elderly man arose from his pew in the rear of the church. He came up towards the front and accosted another man with whom he had been living in fierce and public enmity for years. Stretching out his hand, he said in a loud and tremulous voice so the whole parish could hear him: "You and I have been enemies long enough. It is time we become reconciled in the Lord. Whatever there has been between us, let it be forgiven and for-

gotten. I forgive, and I beg you to forgive me, too. Then the Lord will forgive us also." They shook hands in token of mutual forgiveness.

This ceremony was a sermon after the sermon, more eloquent and impressive perhaps than the missionary's words, for actions speak louder than words. Ordinarily, of course, so demonstrative a reconciliation is neither necessary nor advisable. Among sensible and truly charitable Catholics a formal apology of any kind is rarely expected, let alone demanded. They prefer to iron out their mutual grievances by assuming a mutual conduct which plainly shows that they sincerely regret, and are willing to forgive and forget, their past differences, which loosened or severed the bond of Christian charity between them.

They Are Neurasthenic

Nervous and scrupulous people at times for certain reasons, real or imaginary—usually more the latter than the former—conceive a strong and apparently uncontrollable aversion for some person or other. They simply can not see, be near, speak, or deal with this person in any way at all. Their antipathic sentiment will not tolerate it. Yet not infrequently they live in the same house with, and may even be closely related to this person. On the surface their conduct appears to be grossly uncharitable. They themselves are

ill at ease about it whenever they pray, or receive the sacraments.

In reality, however, the behavior of these unfortunate people is often more a symptom of a corporal than a spiritual illness. They are neurasthenic, and their diseased and abnormal nerves do not allow them to be themselves, or to exercise the proper control over their sentiments and outward behavior. Hence one must not judge their conduct by its appearance only, but make allowances for their unhappy subjective distemper.

If the person, whom these people pretend to hate, and towards whom they act as though they hated him thoroughly, were of a sudden in great distress and misery, they would be the first to hasten to his rescue and assistance, unsolicited and uninvited: which is an evident sign that their pretended hatred is a matter of their morbid imagination, and not of the heart or will.

Nerves Are a Poor Alibi

This is not saying that their untoward and disedifying conduct is altogether without fault. Even nervous people have a free will and an independent mind. If they went about it properly, and used more self-repression and good sense, they could often control their mental and emotional life to such a degree that they could prac-

tice Christian courtesy and kindness towards everyone.

After all, it is usually a sign of a little mind, a selfish heart, and a narrow soul not to be able to rise above one's involuntary feelings with virtuous deliberation and manly resolution. No sooner such nervous people see a chance to be highly favored by the person whom they thoroughly hate, as they say, and to whom they simply can not be civil, they can of a sudden change their coldness of manner into warmth, their detestation into admiration, and their apathy into attachment. He is in a position to help and promote them now, and this makes all the difference. They plainly betray their cravenness and meanness for not being able to do for the love of God what they readily do for selfish and mercenary motives. To sum it all up: Nerves are ordinarily a poor alibi for the lack of true Christian charity.

Unholy and Holy Anger

The Fifth Commandment is violated mortally through the unwarranted infliction of serious bodily or mental harm upon our neighbor in a vicious fight, brawl or quarrel. Vile names, ugly accusations, mean aspersions and violent vituperation, that lack justification, are often grievously sinful. They are venially sinful when they involve only minor breaches of charity. When anger

is uncalled-for, violent and inordinate, and leads to serious abuse of others, or to horrid curses and imprecations, it is a mortal sin. If the anger is slight and controllable, yet without foundation in reason and good sense, it is a venial sin. When there is a cause for just or holy anger, it is no sin to indulge it in moderation. Our Lord was angry when He drove the venders from the temple and also when He repeatedly rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and deceitfulness. Parents should get virtuously angry, for instance, when their children seriously jeopardize their innocence, virtue or faith through frivolity or thoughtlessness. Parents who, in the trenchant words of the prophet, are like "dumb dogs not able to bark, seeing vain things, sleeping and loving dreams" (Isa., 56, 10), while their children are in immediate danger of losing the most precious treasures of this life and the next, are more of a curse than a blessing to their children.

Even Holy Anger Is Dangerous

Still, notwithstanding the value of a so-called holy anger, it is advisable to take to heart the counsel of St. Francis de Sales who bids us to eschew all anger rather than to run the risk of becoming immoderately and sinfully angry. His contention is that it is so hard to keep even a holy anger within bounds—that it is the part of prudence not to yield to it at all, in order to

forestall being beguiled by it into an unholy anger. In theory as well as in practice he held that more flies are caught by one drop of honey than by a barrel of vinegar.

The strongest caution against anger is conveyed by the words of Jesus: "I say to you, that whosoever is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of the judgment. And whosoever shall say to his brother, . . . Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matt., 5, 22). The word "fool" in this connection has not the meaning that a person is silly and stupid in a certain instance, as it usually has when used by our people; but it means one who is utterly abandoned by God and men; hence its attachment to a person indicates great anger and serious uncharitableness. At all events, whoever considers our Lord's words attentively will be on his guard against anger which will or might induce him to call others vile and injurious names.

The Murder of the Soul

It is also a sin against the Fifth Commandment to cause harm to another's spiritual life and health. This is the sin of scandal. It is committed by directly or indirectly tempting or somehow inducing another to commit sin. It is mortal or venial according to the gravity of the sin to the perpetration of which it seduces another. When the scandal is directly given, the nature

of it must be mentioned in confession, if there is question of a grievous matter, or mortal sin. When the scandal is indirectly given, however, it is sufficient to mention the sin of scandal in general, adding the number of times, of course.

To illustrate this, let us say you were going hunting early one Sunday morning with the intention of making a day of it, without hearing holy Mass. In the face of his plea that he would thus have to miss Mass, too, you would ask your neighbor outright to accompany you on the trip. You would not confess sufficiently by saying: "I missed Mass on Sunday, once; and I gave grievous scandal, once." You would have to say: "I missed Mass, and induced another to miss Mass, once."

But if you had gone hunting and missed Mass, as was stated above, without saying a word about it to your neighbor, and he would have taken occasion from your conduct to do the same in imitation of your bad example, it would be satisfactory if you confessed, saying: "I missed Mass, once; I gave grievous scandal, once."

Giving and Taking Scandal

It is worthy of remark that scandal may be given even if the party who is exposed to it does not take or respond to it; the one who gives it is none the less guilty, even if no evil effects follow from it in the case under consideration.

Furthermore, by the very acceptance of direct scandal, scandal is given to the party who gave it in the first place. If one lures you to grievous theft, for instance, he gives scandal to you. If you yield to his temptation and help him steal, you give scandal to him. Both are guilty of mortal sins against justice and charity, against the Seventh and Fifth Commandments, respectively. In confession, however, it will be sufficient to say that you stole grievously with another, without adding that you gave scandal to the other party, since the sin of scandal is implied in the very mutual concurrence.

Scandal is given to individuals, or to groups of several or many, dependently upon the nature, place and time of the action. One who publishes obscene books, papers or plays, for example, or exhibits indecent shows, gives scandal to countless multitudes of people.

Once a person has given scandal it is not enough merely to confess it in order to be forgiven; but it is also necessary to repair the scandal, or at least to have the earnest will to undo as soon as possible the evil that was done. Sometimes this is achieved indirectly, by exhibiting a good example in the same line of conduct to those who were scandalized; in other instances the reparation may have to be direct, through a personal apology and retraction, especially in cases of direct scandal. In matters of doubt it is prudent to obtain the advice of the confessor.

The Reparation of Scandal

Quite frivolously and even rebelliously a girl had contracted marriage outside of the Church in a thoroughly Catholic village. Her parents would not recognize her unless she had her marriage adjusted by the priest. Her pastor, who had charge of the case, told her he would take no steps to have the marriage righted unless she went to a convent of nuns and made an eight days' retreat previous to the performance of the rightful marriage ceremony. She consented to his condition, went to the convent and made the retreat.

I got this story from the pastor himself. Some of my readers may consider his manner rather severe. But the scandal given by the girl was shocking, owing to the circumstances, and he felt its reparation had to be striking, too. Maybe if all such and similar scandals were visited with an equivalent punishment, their number would be considerably lessened.

Fraternal Correction

Here a word may be inserted with reference to fraternal correction. If our neighbor is in spiritual danger, and it is in our power to rescue him from it, by keeping or reclaiming him from sin, we are in duty bound to help him by timely correction and advice. Parents and other superiors, in addition to the general duty of charity, are obligated by their very office to safeguard by season-

able correction, if necessary, the spiritual interests of their charges.

Ordinarily fraternal correction is a duty only when there is a reasonable prospect that it will bear fruit. If the result is quite doubtful, and more harm than good is likely to result from it, fraternal correction is not advisable, let alone obligatory. Conscientious scrupulous persons should not consider themselves bound to fraternal correction, unless the case is so clear that they have not the least doubt as to their duty in the matter. Nervous as they usually are, and considerably at sea regarding their own obligations, they are not competent judges as to the necessity and opportuneness of correcting others; nor would they be likely to help their neighbor as much as they would harm themselves. They usually have all they can do by attending to their own spiritual needs.

Not Too Fast

No one should be too hasty about correcting others. Our Savior puts us on our guard against this common human frailty when He says, rather pointedly: "Why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thy own eye; and then shalt thou see to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matt., 7, 3, 5). And when fraternal cor-

rection is incumbent upon us, we must go about it, according to our Lord's directions (Matt., 18, 15 sqq.), with genuine charity and circumspection, in order to hurt the offender as little as possible while we benefit him all we can. We are to correct him in private and not let a third party in on the secret unless this be necessary for his betterment. Much less are we justified in reporting him to the superiors save in the case of necessity, when all other correctives fail. Of course, if his sin was obviously detrimental to the community, and he would decline all correction, it would have to be reported to the superiors in charge; also if this method evidently accrued to the benefit of the defaulter. If given time and considerate treatment, many a sinner will recover and reform himself without any formal correction, and be the better for it.

Almsgiving

As the Fifth Commandment deals exclusively with charity, or with the love we owe ourselves and others, it will not be amiss to say something anent almsgiving. This has always been looked upon as one of the chief expressions of charity. In former days almsgiving was more individual than it is today. Now, especially in our country, it is quite systematized and done through charitable organizations. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages. Our present

system, all things considered, seems to be the preferable one, however.

In a particular instance the duty of almsgiving binds whenever our neighbor is in need or distress of which we can relieve him without incurring great inconvenience ourselves. After all, true charity begins at home. We have to love ourselves first, before we can love our neighbor as ourselves. Hence if we can only assist our neighbor in his afflictions by inflicting the same or similar afflictions upon ourselves, we are not bound to come to his assistance to such a degree. Thus we would not as a rule be obligated to expose ourselves to a considerable danger of death in order to save another from dying. But if we could ward off his death merely by suffering much inconvenience, charity would oblige us to do so.

“Make Unto You Friends”

But even outside of cases of urgent need almsgiving is a duty for every Christian who is in a position to perform it. Whoever has a surplus over his living expenses must devote a part of it in the interest of the poor: just how much specifically, it is hard to say. Good Catholics, who contribute regularly towards the various pious and charitable purposes for which collections are taken up in our churches, do their duty and more regarding almsgiving. Besides this, they never fail to relieve in a charitable and liberal way the

instances of want that come under their personal observation. They heed the words of Jesus: "Make unto you friends of the mammon of iniquity: that when you shall fail, they may receive you into everlasting dwellings" (Luke, 16, 9). Not seldom the sweet Christian manner of giving is a greater relief in distress than the gift itself.

Fifty Thousand Dollars

Some time ago I remember reading in the daily paper a press dispatch stating that an edlerly gentleman took suddenly ill on a train. A young lady who saw his plight gave him what attention and help she could. When he was about to alight he thanked her warmly and asked her for her name and address. She demurred giving him this information, saying that she only did her duty in serving and helping him as she did. Yet he insisted; and she gave him her name and address. Not long after she got a check for fifty thousand dollars from her "patient". It was a most generous reward, indeed. Yet it is as nothing compared to the reward Jesus will give to those who are good to the poor, in keeping with His words: "Whosoever shall give to drink to one of these little ones a cup of cold water . . . , amen I say to you, he shall not lose His reward" (Matt., 10, 42). "As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me" (Matt., 25, 40).

CHAPTER XVII.

The Sixth and Ninth Commandments

*Thou shalt not commit adultery . . . Thou shalt not
covet thy neighbor's wife.*

THEOLOGIANs teach that every wilful sin of outright unchastity, according to one's station in life, whether the sin be done in thought, desire, word or deed, through emotions, looks or touches, is a grievous sin. The reason of the gravity of this sin is on the one hand the desecration it involves according to the words of the Apostle: "Know you not that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? But if any man violate the temple of God, him shall God destroy. For the temple of God is holy, which you are" (1 Cor., 3, 16). On the other hand this sin is mortal because of the strong tendency to and great danger of repetition which its perpetration begets. In view of this inherent deadly force it has been for centuries and is now called the lubricous or slippery sin, for once a start of it is made, the progress of it is lethal, and its end destruction.

The Wise Covenant

The Sixth Commandment forbids every impurity in general. The Ninth Commandment lays particular stress on the avoidance of adulterous desires. While a sinful action of itself always has a greater element of malice than a mere ineffectual thought or desire, still such thoughts or desires against chastity, when they are wilful, are also mortally sinful, according to our Lord's solemn and emphatic declaration: "I say to you, that whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt., 5, 28). Over a thousand years previously Job had said: "I made a covenant with my eyes that I would not so much as think upon a virgin" (Job., 31, 1). This covenant with the eyes is significant as a point of spiritual psychology, by the way. The eyes are no doubt the main avenue to the soul. If they are properly guarded against unchastity, it will hardly find an entrance into the mind and heart of man.

To constitute a mortal sin of impurity the three elements required for every mortal sin, as was said in a previous chapter, must coexist, namely: the transgression is grievous; it is clearly recognized as such at the time of its perpetration; in spite of this distinct knowledge the transgressor commits it with full consent. The transgression is always grievous if it is downright unchaste, as was mentioned above.

Direct and Indirect Unchastity

Something may not be unchaste in itself, but may have a tendency to tempt or lure one to unchastity. There come to mind certain sentimental thoughts, imaginations, conversations, books, pictures, shows, dances, games, songs, melodies, stories and jokes; or a certain manner of personal behavior towards oneself or others in posture, looks, touches or dress.

These things may be perfectly legitimate for one, yet positively sinful for another. One and the same dance, for example, may give rise to no impure temptation in one, and it may be the ruin of virtue for another. To indulge in these and similar things, therefore, is not of itself a sin. It may be fully justified by the circumstances of the case and be no sin whatever. Or it may be a venial sin; or, again, a mortal sin.

As a general rule, when these things constitute for a person the proximate occasion of sin: either because they tempt him violently and insistently, or because they have frequently and quite regularly induced him to sin mortally before: he is bound under pain of grievous sin to avoid them. If his condition or vocation in life demand his use or pursuit of them, he must do all in his power, by prayer and other means of self-conquest, to convert the proximate occasion of sin into a remote one. And for everyone it is the part of wisdom to avoid every allure to impurity as

much as possible. As regards chastity especially it is far easier to evade or fly from a temptation at once than to conquer it after it has assumed volume through carelessness or over-confidence on our part.

Proximate and Remote Occasion

Here the question may be asked: What is a proximate occasion of sin? And how can it be reduced to a remote occasion? A proximate occasion of sin is a situation in which one, if he thrusts himself into it, or remains in it, will very likely sin. All the odds are against his constancy in virtue. He has sinned so often in the same or a similar conjuncture that he will most probably sin again no sooner he is in it once more. It may be a person, a place, or an object that produces the occasion.

If he can avoid this occasion without serious inconvenience, he must avoid it by all means. If he can not, for grave reasons, avoid the proximate occasion, he must convert it into a remote one, by increasing his power of resistance on the one hand and diminishing the force of the temptation on the other. He does this by thoroughly and insistently using the means of grace and perseverance, such as: prayer, good reading, the thought of God's presence, the frequentation of the sacraments, the association with virtuous persons, mortification and self-denial, and the application of certain

common sense precautions. If for a big money consideration, for instance, you could abstain from sinning in a certain company or environment, why can you not abstain for the love of God and the eternal welfare of your immortal soul?

Semi-Conscious

Even when the violation of purity is in itself grievous, the offender is frequently absolved from a grave fault in the matter because of his lack of clear knowledge of the grievousness of the sin while he was doing it; or because of his want of full consent to the sin. Many are beguiled into a train of sensuous thoughts, for example, before they are really aware of their heinousness; even as many appear to be yielding to impure thoughts and feelings in a half-waking or semi-conscious condition, in which they are not capable of mortal sin, owing to their inability to render full and deliberate consent. The same is true of those who are drawn into something unchaste through a violent impulse or sexual urge ere they have full control of their reason and will in the situation. This happens but very seldom, it is true; but when it happens, there can not be question of mortal sin, which is always done after sufficient deliberation or, at least, with full consciousness of the guilt of the act, and complete consent to and entire acquiescence in it.

Unreasonably Timid

While it is impossible to be too careful and conscientious in the preservation of holy chastity, one may yet be unreasonably timid regarding temptations to impurity, and thus render the practice of the holy virtue unnecessarily difficult, if not altogether impossible. I am referring to undue and immoderate scrupulosity, which is in reality much more an enemy than a friend to true purity of heart and conduct.

Good common sense is necessary for one's proper conduct in all affairs of life, especially in those of virtue, holiness and salvation. God does not expect the impossible of anyone. In His entire service, personal purity not excluded, He declares that His yoke is sweet, and His burden light (Matt., 11, 30). He wants it to be just that and nothing else. Normally the observance of chastity is a sweet yoke and a light burden to all those, single or married, who use the means of virtue, reason, faith and piety at their disposal.

Whoever leads a regular Christian life: says his prayers constantly; occupies himself habitually with the thought of God's presence; attends Mass and receives the sacraments regularly; reads good books; associates with virtuous companions; mortifies himself by keeping the obligatory days of fast and abstinence according to his capacity; avoids the temptations he can avoid; and starts immediately to fight against the temptations he

can not avoid—ordinarily the best way to fight them is to fly from them, ignore them, and divert the mind into other channels—: a Catholic of this stamp as a rule does not find it overly hard to remain chaste.

Interior Joy

It costs the victor many a self-restraint and sacrifice, it is true; but it also gives him great comfort and interior joy. His present reward even, not to mention the eternal, is well worth his effort. Life knows no delight that is sweeter than easy and consistent self-mastery, or the dominion of the mind over the body, and of the spirit over the flesh. This is obtained in the quickest and most definite manner through the practice of unrelenting chastity: just as contrariwise man is inveigled into the most humiliating and galling slavery through nothing so fast and with such finality as through impurity. But again, to achieve this victory of purity, common sense must always prevail over excessive timorousness and meticulousness.

In itself and all its parts nature is entirely good, being created by the all-holy God precisely as it is. This is equally true of the human body, its organs and functions. There is nothing in them all that is intrinsically bad. Hence there is nothing which one may not think of, picture, ponder over, read, study or discuss, orally or in

script, with becoming modesty and reverence. And whenever there is a good cause for any of these occupations, when they refer to the human body, its elements or functions, they are not sinful even if they indirectly give rise to impure temptations, provided these temptations do not expose one to a proximate, or very great, danger of sinning grievously. The same applies to the seeing, touching or handling one's own or another's body for purposes of cleanliness or health.

The Human Body Is Sacred

These actions of themselves contain no sin, as the human body is sacred and good in its every part. To view it otherwise, and to act in accordance with this false view, is superstitious and un-Christian, and is anything but conducive to genuine chastity. If one does the aforesaid actions from motives of sheer curiosity, without any other sufficient warrant, they would involve a venial sin only, unless they would cause serious temptations to impurity.

There are natural things and functions into which the sexual element does not enter. Yet nature prompts them to be surrounded and veiled with a certain privacy and secrecy. Uncalled-for and inelegant allusions or references to them are universally considered vulgar, improper and in bad taste. Yet these allusions, or phrases, or stories referring to them are not un-

chaste, in the theological conception of the word, since, as we are supposing, there is in them no implication of sexual delight as such. They may violate chastity indirectly, however, by gradually or abruptly leading on to it, as they frequently do; then they are at least venially sinful.

When Doubts Arise

In case a person who is habitually conscientious in the practice of virtue doubts if he committed a mortal sin of impurity in a given instance, whether in thought, desire or deed: if he is not at once sure, or fully conscious and convinced that he sinned grievously: he can assume, without any fear or remorse, that he did not sin mortally; and he can and should dismiss the matter categorically and finally from his mind, without ever recalling it again for special examination or adjudication, either in his daily examens of conscience or in his preparation for confession. He will do the best, the wisest and most virtuous thing by ignoring it completely once for all.

The unpleasant incident will stimulate him, however, to keep up his habit of frequently renewing the acts of perfect love and contrition. In case he had any guilt at all in the matter—even though it was in reality a grievous guilt—it will all be attended to sufficiently, and wiped out entirely by his aspirations of perfect love and sorrow.

The Only Method

This practice is universally followed by all pious and saintly persons, lay people, religious and ecclesiastics, with much spiritual comfort and success. It is the only method to follow for such conscientious persons who are afflicted or threatened with the bane of scrupulosity. Lax and habitually unscrupulous persons, of course, must take it for granted, if they chance to doubt if they committed a serious sin of unchastity in a certain instance, that they sinned mortally, in keeping with their ordinary behavior in such matters.

As regards confession proper, persons who are not scrupulous, as has been remarked in an antecedent chapter, may confess their doubtful sins with no little profit; whereas scrupulous persons do best by not making any mention of them whatever. On the other hand, lax persons ought to confess their doubtful sins, as all the evidence is in their disfavor.

The Fetich of Sex

We are living in an age which makes a fetich of sex. We hear and read a great deal more of sex appeal, sex urge and sex complexes than of sex moderation, sex restraint and sex control. Outside of the Catholic Church the opinion that one's sex life is altogether his own, without any account having to be given of it to anyone

but himself: to live, enjoy, conserve, waste or destroy it as he lists, is largely prevalent, and to a considerable extent it menaces our Catholic population.

Even the horrid crime of adultery is being shorn of its hideousness in modern novels and stage and film plays, and is made to appear as a mere human weakness, not only easily excusable and pardonable, but often even lovable and desirable. In the face of this uncivilizing, debasing and brutalizing propaganda the Church unwaveringly upholds and proclaims the solemn commandments of God: "Thou shalt not commit adultery . . . Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife."

Petting and Love-Making Parties

What helps to beguile a number of people into sins of impurity is the deceptive manner of naming certain acts of lechery used by the votaries of it. They call very ugly acts by nice and innocent-sounding names, and thus decoy the guileless and thoughtless into practicing them. There is, for instance, what they call a petting party or a love-making party. These names are decidedly euphemistic. They express vicious conduct in words that express what appears to be nice and noble, but what in reality is often foul and infamous.

If the names were to fit the reality of the behavior ordinarily used at said parties, they would

more justly be called poison and murder parties. Virtue, purity, honor, mutual respect, the peace of conscience, grace, the love of God and the title to heaven are often poisoned, murdered and utterly destroyed in those salacious trysts or rendezvous. It has well been said that a girl who pets gives everything for nothing. She forfeits her greatest treasures to reap only remorse, dishonor and neglect. And the young man who seduces her to this forfeiture fares no better. For a momentary questionable or, rather, objectionable pleasure he renounces his noble manliness, his sense of Christian chivalry and high gallantry, and ruins in himself and his companion every sublime idealism of Catholic life.

He Was Careful

St. Francis de Sales tells of a gentleman who expressed great admiration and high esteem for a certain man. When this gentleman one day was offered the opportunity of meeting and being introduced to the object of his admiration he declined it, saying he preferred not to meet the man, in order not to risk losing the exalted opinion he entertained of him; if he met him at close range and conversed with him, he might be disappointed in him.

His caution contained a grain of true psychology. If lovers or would-be lovers always bore the truth in mind that too much proximity and

mutual self-revelation are not wise; in other words, that familiarity breeds contempt: many a promising love-affair would have a more honorable and happy issue than it now has.

Two Great Catastrophes

It is an age-long mistake of men and women who are inclined to sensuality to believe that just so there are enough to practice lechery, the crime or sin will be condoned or, at all events, not harshly dealt with. As though the number of transgressors modified the unchanging attributes of God's unspeakable holiness and justice. It is worthy of notice that in the Bible we read of two destructions of mankind on a large scale: the one through the deluge; the other through fire sent from heaven.

Both punishments were provoked by impurity in vast dimensions and abominable manifestations. "When God had seen that the earth was corrupted [for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth] He said to Noe: The end of all flesh is come before Me; the earth is filled with iniquity through them; and I will destroy them with the earth" (Gen., 6, 12, 13). The fact that the whole earth reeked with impurity, far from lessening, only increased the wrath of God, and incensed it to an instantaneous eruption and unmitigated visitation. No one, therefore, will lull himself to a sense of security in his life of sensuality because

of the many addicted to the same vice, in marriage and outside of marriage.

Brimstone and Fire

As to Sodom and Gomorrha, the inhabitants of which had given themselves to unnatural indulgences of impurity, the Lord said: "The cry of Sodom and Gomorrha is multiplied, and their sin is become exceedingly grievous" (Gen., 18, 20). Abraham pleaded and pleaded with God to spare the city because of the just mingled with the wicked. God finally agreed that, if in the entire city there were found ten just persons, he would not destroy it. But not even ten chaste people could be found in the entire territory of the two cities, so universal had low carnal indulgence become. "And the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrha brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And He destroyed these cities, and all the country about: all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from the earth" (Gen., 19, 24, 25). The fact that practically everyone yielded to brutishness seemed but to make God more angry and the destruction more thorough.

The Deadly Infection

There is another wholesome lesson contained in these two disgraceful experiences of mankind: the rapidity and relative universality of the spread

of the deadly infection of impurity. If it is not vigorously checked betimes, the contagion of unchastity infests an entire community with a swiftness greater and more effective than that of any corporal pestilence, deadly miasma or obnoxious germ. For this reason a pure person instinctively flies from the approach or the company of anyone infected with unchastity. Of lecherous persons the Bible says pregnantly: "Their throat is an open sepulchre" (Ps. 5, 11).

From an open grave, in which there is a body in advanced stages of corruption, there issues the breath of foulness and the atmosphere of death. No one can withstand it for a length of time with immunity. The only safety lies in quick and utter flight. This is the one attitude to take towards a person tainted and rank with impurity. His obscene words and salacious stories carry the germs of spiritual death and impart them to everyone who listens with interest and relish. Of such and other sinful conversations one of the Holy Fathers says that he who speaks them has the devil on his tongue, while he who listens to them has the devil in his ear. The impure talkers and listeners are usually impregnated through and through with the demon of impurity.

It is impossible in this treatise which is intended for all classes of Christians, in the world and in the cloister, to go into details regarding the individual sins against the Sixth and Ninth Command-

ments, according to the various stations of life; and the proper way of confessing these sins. I again beg to refer my readers to my books "Plain Talks on Marriage", and "Youth's Pathfinder". In them I have dwelled in detail on the various sins against the Sixth and Ninth Commandments committed by married or single people, respectively.

"Nothing Under the Sun Is New"

Here I merely want to mention that, if one has sinned, no matter in what way, and how often, and with whom, he should not be ashamed to confess his sins humbly and sincerely in the confessional. It was a great shame to sin; but it is no shame, but a great honor, to confess the sin candidly and contritely. It will not be a new and shocking story to the priest by any means. Here the words of the Bible apply: "Nothing under the sun is new, neither is any man able to say: Behold this is new. For it hath already gone before in the ages that were before us" (Eccl., 1, 10). And as to the danger of the priest remembering anything against you, the inspired words that follow are also to the point: "There is no remembrance of former things: nor indeed of those things which hereafter are to come shall there be any remembrance with them that shall be in the latter end" (ib., 11).

Delicate and Reverent

Another caution I wish to give is: In your recital of your sins, especially of those against chastity, aim to be delicate and reverent in the words and expressions you use, avoiding anything that smacks of vulgarity, coarseness or impropriety of language in the holy tribunal of penance. You are in a holy place when you kneel at the feet of the priest, God's delegate. Nor need you go into unnecessary details in confessing your sins of impurity. As long as the priest knows the nature and kind of the sin you have done, and the number of times it was done, your recital is sufficient. If the priest feels he ought to have more detailed information in order to understand the condition of your conscience better and give you surer guidance, he will ask you corresponding questions. Answer them composedly and sincerely. They only serve your interest. As a rule, whenever one commits an impure act with himself or another, there are corresponding thoughts, desires and feelings preceding and accompanying the act; yet it is ordinarily sufficient to confess the sinful act, since it includes the other things commonly associated with it. And if the sin was perpetrated with another, every care must be taken not to reveal in any way the identity of the other party.

A Pearl of Great Price

For all of us, whether we have preserved or recovered our baptismal holiness, it is mandatory to bear in mind that for every Christian, single or married, chastity is a pearl of great price. This pearl, however, is particularly priceless for those who have never seriously tarnished it through mortal sin. Shakespeare says that whoever steals our purse steals trash; but who deprives us of our good name takes something from us that is dearer than life itself. Yet even a good name can be recovered, even as a lost purse can be reclaimed. But baptismal innocence, once seriously tainted through impurity, is lost forever.

It is true, the sinner can recover virtue and grace through penance, and may become holier and dearer to God than before his fall: but the glory of unsullied baptismal innocence will never be his again. God Himself can not restore it to him; for it does not lie within the power of omnipotence to cause something, that has already happened, never to have happened. Even as no faded lily has ever regained its pristine loveliness; and no crushed egg its onetime perfect form: so, too, no tainted innocence has ever been restored to its primeval, untarnished beauty. This reflection must make all the readers of this book, who have to this day preserved their baptismal innocence unseared, more jealous than ever of their

heavenly prerogative; so they will say in humble gratitude towards and full confidence in God: "I will not give my glory to another" (Isa., 42, 8). In His turn God exhorts them, saying: "Let no stain sully thy glory" (Ecclus., 33, 24).

A Striking Conversion

Not so very long ago a Protestant gentleman came to the rectory and asked to see a priest. When the priest arrived, he said abruptly: "Father, I want to become a Catholic." The priest congratulated him on his resolution, and asked him if he was contemplating marriage with a Catholic girl. The man denied this. The priest asked him what books he had read and what studies he had made that urged him to become a Catholic. He replied that he had read no books and made no studies. "Why, then, are you so eager to become a Catholic?" queried the priest.

The man explained, that he happened to be living in the same house with a Catholic family that had a daughter of about eighteen years. He was not acquainted with her personally, much less was he in love with her. But he had occasion to observe and admire her conduct at close range. "Father," he continued, "when I noticed her sterling virtue, her unsullied innocence and angelic purity, I could not but say within myself: The religion that produces and maintains such fruits of goodness must be from God. I know it is

from God, Father. And I want you to make a Catholic of me as soon as you can." It was not long and to his great joy he was soon received in the true Church. The pure young lady was a silent but potent missionary to him. There is no eloquence so strong and irresistible as that of a uniformly virtuous and innocent conduct. Here the words of Jesus come to mind: "Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God" (Matt., 5, 8). Not only do the chaste see God themselves, but others, as the man in our story, see God in them and through them.

Nipped in the Bud

Many conversions are made in a manner similar to the one described above. They do not all come to light so dramatically and gratifyingly. On the other hand, sad to say, not a few conversions to the faith are nipped in the bud and killed forever by the absence of purity in Catholics. I am now referring to Catholics of both sexes who injudiciously are keeping company, with a view of marriage, with non-Catholics.

In many instances these non-Catholics have a high opinion of Catholic morality in general, and the chastity of our Catholic young people in particular. When, then, in the course of the courtship the Catholic party shows a weakness for sensuous and impure love-making, for indecent liberties and obscene familiarities, the

non-Catholic, even if he or she was the first offender, is usually unutterably shocked, his or her high conception of Catholics and their religion suffers a complete reversal, and will likely never be retrieved again. It is ordinarily dangerous enough for a Catholic to keep company with a non-Catholic at all. But for a Catholic to shock and scandalize a non-Catholic by gross impurity is as wicked as it is inexcusable.

The Church's Proud Boast

From its very beginning it has been the unchallenged boast of the Catholic Church that it keeps the hearts and minds of its young people pure and clean. The Church wants to extend this boast not only to its young but also its mature and old members. Let us all help the Church to this splendid boast, so that Christ "might present to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph., 5, 27).

Our Catholic women, young and old, will remember, however, that upon them especially devolves the duty of preserving the Catholic social body chaste and pure. God has given them a stronger instinct for purity and a greater zeal for its preservation than to men. Worldly-minded and sensuous cynics tauntingly declare that every woman has her price, meaning there is not one but can be lured to impurity by some

bait or other. Like our virgin martyrs in the past, ever so many Catholic girls and women of today have not their price. Their innocence, virginity, or conjugal chastity, respectively, are dearer to them than life itself, and everything that life contains. They would gladly die in defense of their virtue and honor. "O how beautiful is the chaste generation with glory, for the memory thereof is immortal: because it is known both with God and with men. When it is present they imitate it: and they desire it when it hath withdrawn itself. And it triumpheth crowned forever, winning the reward of undefiled conflicts" (Wisd., 4, 1, 2).

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Seventh and Tenth Commandments

“Thou shalt not steal . . . Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods.”

THE Seventh Commandment forbids injustice in general; the Tenth Commandment forbids it expressly in desire. Both will be dealt with conjointly.

The Seventh Commandment of God is violated when one unjustly appropriates or damages the goods or property of another. If he thereby inflicts grievous injury upon another, he is guilty of mortal sin; if the injury is slight, it is a venial sin. One may deprive another of his goods directly by robbery, when he takes away another’s belongings by sheer force and violence; or by theft, when he steals them secretly. Again he may dispossess another of what belongs to him through fraud or cheating in a bargain; by using false measures or weights; by adulterating foods or articles of merchandise; by employing counterfeit money or bogus checks; by misrepresentation, exaggeration or concealment; by charging for what has not been delivered, or by not paying

for what has been delivered; by accepting more change than he is entitled to take; by not making mention of and not paying for an article received, the billing of which was overlooked; by neglecting to pay his debts; by underpaying employes; by serious loafing at his work and thus defrauding his employer, etc.

Fifty Dollars

It is not easy to fix definitely the sums which in theft or property damage constitute a mortal sin. Much depends upon the conditions of the injured party in every case. Theologians, however, distinguish what they call the absolute and the relative sums in theft and property damage. The absolute sum always represents a mortal sin regardless of the person or corporation that suffer the injustice. It seems to be agreed that fifty dollars or the equivalent designate the absolute sum in our country today. This means that if one stole fifty dollars from the richest man in the country, or from the wealthiest corporation in the land, or from the very United States of America, he would be guilty of a serious sin of injustice. While fifty dollars seems to be but an infinitesimal part of a billionaire's wealth, still, if everyone could deprive him of fifty dollars without grievous guilt, soon his entire fortune might disappear.

Twenty-five Cents

The relative sum is gaged by the economical condition of the injured party. Whatever causes him serious damage constitutes a mortal sin for the thief, or for the one who violates his property. Ordinarily, the sum which is represented by a person's daily wage or income—under the absolute sum given above—is considered sufficient to make up a mortal sin of theft. A man, for example, earns five dollars a day: if you steal this sum from him, you are guilty of mortal sin. A woman makes three dollars a day washing and scrubbing: if you steal so much from her, you commit a grievous sin. A poor beggar has but twenty-five cents left for his next meal: if you steal all he has, you perpetrate a serious sin. The same relative sum applies in cheating or damaging another's property. If you cheat another of but a slight sum at a time; but your cheating is consciously continuous on given occasions—say you use short measures or weights towards the same customers day for day—these slight frauds may gradually coalesce into large ones and grow into mortal sins as soon as a sufficiently big sum is reached.

Restitution

To obtain forgiveness of the sin of theft or unjust violation of another's property it is necessary not only to confess the sin sincerely, but

also to restore the ill-gotten goods or repair the injury inflicted. This ought to be done before the reception of absolution, if at all possible. If it is not possible or reasonably feasible to make the required restitution before one receives absolution, one must at least have the sincere will to make it as soon as he can.

Restitution may be made directly or indirectly. Just so it is made fully, the manner of it usually matters little. All that is required is that the owner receive what is rightfully his according to the circumstances of the theft or injury. I add this latter clause to indicate that often it is not sufficient to restore merely the sum of the stolen or damaged goods, but it is also necessary to add the interest that would have accrued to, or the amount of the damage that was additionally incurred by, the owner who was injured. As long, then, as the rightful owner recovers what is his: whether he knows the party that is restituting or not; whether he considers he is receiving a pure donation or is the subject of some extraordinary good fortune: just so he somehow gets back what belongs to him, the restitution is sufficient.

The Man Is Rich

This restitution must be made as soon as it is reasonably possible. A man is not obliged to deprive himself and his family of the neces-

saries of life, or even of a decent living, according to his social condition, in order to make restitution; but he must retrench the luxuries and superfluities of life so he can restore to another what is his due. Restitution must be made to the rightful owner, if he can be located; if he can not be found, it must be made to his lawful heirs; if they are not available, it must be made to pious or charitable purposes. It is by no means in keeping with justice to say, for example: "The man I owe the money to is so rich that he never misses it at all; hence I shall give it to poor people that need it." You have no right to dispose of money that belongs to another. If the rich man wants to give his money to the poor, that is his option, not yours. He is entitled to receive what belongs to him independently of his riches.

Divers Ways of Restitution

There are times when restitution can be made through personal service, labor or trading. If you have taken pay for work you have not rendered in your place of employment, you can make it good by furnishing more work than you have contracted for. If you have accepted too much change and taken it home with you; or one or the other articles which you bought were not billed, through an oversight, and you consciously did not pay for them; later on it would be em-

barassing and humiliating for you to call the attention of the parties concerned to the matter: you could restitute by continuing to deal in such a degree in the respective place that gradually the loss would be retrieved by the firm. If only a slight amount is involved, and it would require an altogether disproportionate expense to get in communication with the injured party, restitution may be made to pious and charitable causes.

In cases of doubt as to how, to whom and when restitution is to be made, it is advisable to submit the case to the confessor. If the case is a long and involved one, it is prudent to approach the confessor when he has sufficient leisure for it. Restitution often gets to be a very complicated problem of conscience, which requires much thought and expert knowledge for its adequate solution.

“Lost” and “Found” Column

It happens at times that a person finds money or articles of considerable value. He may not without further ado appropriate these things to himself, but he has the duty of trying to find the rightful owner. This is done by scanning the “Lost” column in the local papers, or by advertising, at the owner’s expense, the articles in the “Found” column. If the articles are found in a train or street car, or in a church or other public building, it is proper to leave them, or

at least a notice of the find, with the responsible officials. In case, after a reasonably long and thoroughly conscientious search, no trace of the owner can be found, the finder may either keep the articles himself or, which is more laudable, dispose of them in the interest of the poor or of pious purposes.

A woman, returning from church on Sunday, told her husband what a wonderful sermon she had just heard: all about dishonesty, stealing and petty meanness. The husband asked her if she walked or rode home. "I rode," she answered, "but I was lucky enough to dodge the conductor so he did not get my fare."

The other day the paper carried the story of a traveling salesman who died and left an estate of five hundred towels, two hundred cakes of soap, three dozen silver spoons, twenty electric bulbs and a hotel key of a distant city. There is a certain grim humor in both these little anecdotes.

Pay Your Debts

What surprised me not a little in my observations and experiences of life as a priest and missionary was to note how many people, Catholics, too, have very lax consciences in the matter of paying their just debts. They borrow money from relatives, friends or others with a solemn promise to pay the loans at a certain period; they have a charge account in various stores and

with professional people for services received; their rents and instalment payments are over-due: and yet they neglect to pay these and similar debts for months and years with the greatest unconcern and without a vestige of embarrassment. Not as though they did not have or could not procure the money wherewith to pay their debts: on the contrary they apparently have plenty of money the way they dress, go auto-riding, attend shows, give parties, and the like.

Using Other People's Money

The only thing these people have no money for is to liquidate their honest debts. They appear hurt and seem to resent it much if their creditors ever presume to remind them of their duty of justice. They know their business and will attend to their own affairs, they say impudently; but in reality they do not attend to the very important affair of paying their debts. They are merely using other people's money to make a display and create an impression of comfort, ease and affluence, when in reality they are thieves and rascals.

These people are not seldom such as go to church and carry on as models of piety and paragons of religiousness, frequently receiving the sacraments, but never once accusing themselves in the confessional of their mortal sins of injustice and thievery. They may be deceiving

themselves, but they are not deceiving God. It may be added that these people are usually as remiss in their sacred duty of supporting the church as they are in paying their other obligations of conscience.

A Fine Mission

Several years ago one of our Fathers and myself were preaching a mission in a large city. A few days after the mission got under way one of the parishioners, who had a grocery near the church, came to the pastor to tell him what a fine mission they were having. The pastor knew the man well and thought he was merely joking. "How do you know it is a fine mission, since this is the ladies' mission week?" the pastor retorted. The man then explained that already three or four of his customers, who had long-standing debts on his books, and of whose paying qualities he had about despaired, had come to square their accounts and pay all they owed. "I say, Father," he continued, "this is a splendid mission. I hope it continues being so good, for I have a few more hard-boiled debtors whom I should like to see meet their bills this or next week."

Such occurrences are not uncommon in missions: yet it is a pity that it takes a mission to rouse certain Catholics to a sense of their elementary duty of justice. Their nightly examination of conscience, or at least their periodical

approach to the sacred tribunal of penance ought to achieve this by all means. "Better is a little to the just than the great riches of the wicked. . . . I have been young, and now am old: and I have not seen the just forsaken, nor his seed seeking bread. . . . The Lord loveth judgment, and will not forsake His saints. . . . The just shall inherit the land, and shall dwell therein forevermore" (Ps. 36, 16, 28, 29).

CHAPTER XIX.

The Eighth Commandment

PART ONE

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

ON the face of it the Eighth Commandment seems to prohibit only the giving of false testimony against our neighbor, confirmed or unconfirmed, by an oath. If false testimony is supported by an oath it involves the mortal sin of perjury which was treated in the discussion of the Second Commandment. Inferentially, however, a number of other sins, more or less related to false testimony, are forbidden by the Eighth Commandment.

First, there is the sin of lying. You tell a lie when, in order to deceive, you wilfully make an utterance that is in disharmony with your mind. God intended that the spoken or written word should be a reflection and an expression of the mind. When instead of that you have your words to reflect the contrary of what is in your mind, for the purpose of deception, you commit a sin against veracity or truthfulness. Of itself a lie is

a venial sin. It is mortally sinful, however, either when it inflicts serious damage upon another, or is confirmed by an oath.

Telling a Lie in the Confessional

A lie in the confessional is a mortal sin when it interferes with the substance of the sacrament, or has reference to something essential. If the priest, for instance, asked a penitent, who said he sinned with a woman, whether the woman was married; and the penitent, knowing she was married, would say she was single: this would be a mortal sin, as the lie concealed the grievous sin of adultery which he committed.

But even in the confessional, if a lie does not affect the essence of the sacrament, it is only a venial sin. Say from fear of getting a scolding for having stayed away so long from confession you would tell the priest that your confession was a month ago, when in reality it was two months ago: of itself this lie would be only a venial sin, and would not vitiate the confession. Of course, this lie in the sacred tribunal would be more serious than an ordinary lie, and would not bespeak a very good disposition for the best reception of the sacrament: yet it would be only a venial sin.

“Every Man Is a Liar”

The sin of lying is now, and seems to have always been, quite common among men. About

three thousand years ago David said: "Every man is a liar" (Ps. 115, 11). Nearly nineteen hundred years ago St. Paul wrote: "God is true and every man a liar" (Rom., 3, 4). In this phase of life mankind does not seem to have improved since then. When the inspired writers say that every man is a liar, they use the word man in the generic term, meaning every human being, for women lie as well as men. There are those who say that women ordinarily lie more than men: but this will always be a mooted and undecided question which it is idle to discuss.

Again, when the inspired writers assert that everyone is a liar, they speak in a general way, not intending, however, to say that from this universal condemnation no one may claim exemption. There always have been and there are today a number of God-loving and truth-loving souls of holy simplicity and candor who never tell a lie, and who have never told one. Of them may be said what Jesus said with reference to Nathanael: "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile" (John, 1, 47).

"He Scattereth"

Of this stamp every follower of Christ should aim to be. Openly and solemnly, before the tribunal of the land, before the Roman governor and all the priests and people, Jesus declared: "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world,

that I should give testimony to the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth My voice" (John, 18, 37). Again He says: "He that is not with Me is against Me: and he that gathereth not with Me, scattereth" (Matt., 12, 30).

Whoever, then, wants to be with Christ and gather with Him must be a staunch lover and promoter of the truth. This will not only ingratiate him strongly with God, but will also win for him an enviable reputation for unswerving truthfulness, reliableness and trust among men, besides bringing much personal comfort to himself. There is a keen gratification in the consciousness of being straightforward and candid on all occasions and of never being beguiled into an untruth out of respect for any person. On the other hand a habitual liar is soon detected and known and treated as such. Everyone mistrusts, despises and shuns him. "The manners of lying men are without honor: and their confusion is with them without ceasing" (Ecclus., 20, 28).

White Lies

Every real lie: whether it be a lie of expedience, so-called, or a jocose lie, or a business lie, or a malicious lie: is a sin. Some people excuse their lying by saying they only tell white lies, meaning lies that do no harm, but rather seem to do good by averting trouble, keeping people in good humor, and the like. There are no white lies. All lies

are, in a spiritual sense, black, even as is the devil from whom all lies originate, and who brought all our misery upon us by lying to our first parents. Of him our Savior says trenchantly: "Truth is not in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father thereof" (John, 8, 44).

Mental Restriction

There are occasions in which it is permissible to use what theologians call a mental restriction. The speaker expresses his sentiments in such a manner that his words of themselves contain no lie, even though they may mislead the hearer into a false assumption. If the hearer were thoroughly conversant with all the angles of the situation, he would readily catch the true drift of the words. If he is led into understanding them differently from how they were intended to be understood, this is not the fault of the speaker but the hearer. For good and valid reasons the speaker can permit this misconstruction of his words to occur.

An example will illustrate this. A murderer goes to a certain priest to confession and reveals his crime of murder. Someone then asks the priest if he knows anything about that particular murder and its perpetrator. The priest bluntly says: "I do not know a thing about it." This is not a lie, but a mental restriction. He intends to

say: "In my private, personal capacity I do not know a thing about it. As to the knowledge I have of it through confession: this is not mine to reveal." Everyone who is acquainted with the secrecy of the confessional would understand the first words exactly in this sense. If one happens not to be so acquainted, it is his, not the priest's fault.

The End of the World

Our Lord Himself used this mental reservation when the apostles asked Him regarding the end of the world, saying: "Tell us, when shall these things be?" (Mark, 13, 4.) Jesus answered: "Of that day or hour no man knoweth, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father" (ib., 32). Yet, being God, He, the Son, knew the time as well as the Father. But He did not know it as the Messiah; in other words it was not a part of His message to the world, and was consequently not to be revealed.

Physicians, lawyers and others who receive professional secrets from their clients may use the same kind of mental reservation to keep the trust to their clients. If this were not allowed, social life would be grievously disturbed, and human confidence would be generally undermined. In other circumstances of life, too, for example in certain delicate domestic situations in which, if the truth were spoken outright and unvarnished,

grave personal or family troubles and inconveniences would arise, it is allowed to have recourse to mental restrictions, or to say the truth in a veiled manner, so that it can be grasped by one who understands, although it may not be apprehended by the person to whom the utterance is directed. Caution must be employed, however, so the mental restriction does not develop into a real lie.

Not at Home

There are certain conventional phrases in use among men which, taken literally, do not represent the truth; but understood in their customary sense, they are not lies. They are manners of speech by which people express hard and unpleasant things as softly and unoffensively as possible. Take the common expression: "He is not at home." This is used socially to mean a man is not at home for a particular person or business, although physically and really he may be and is at home.

A woman who is known to be an ugly and disagreeable gossip calls up your home by telephone to ask whether you will be at home in the afternoon. If so, she wants to visit you. You dislike her visits very much, since her vile talk jars and irritates you more than you can say. You will be at home in the afternoon, and you know you will; yet you direct your daughter to say that much

to her regret mother will not be at home in the afternoon. This is no lie. It is only a softer way of saying: "Mother will be at home, but she does not want you to visit her." This, if spoken bluntly, would incense the woman and cause much bitterness; hence popular custom tones it down to a softer phrase that has the same meaning. Anyone who knows the way of social usage understands the words as I have explained them.

"Glad to Meet You"

Similar expressions are: "I am glad to meet you;" "I am sorry you have to leave so soon;" "I hope you will soon come again," and the like. No one who knows men and their ways takes these or kindred expressions literally. If someone asks you: "How do you do?" You can say: "I am doing well, thank you," even though you may have a bad tooth or a pain near your heart. You need not tell all your troubles in answer to what is nothing else but a conventional question of courtesy. The questioner knows how to discount your answer accordingly. Regarding these phrases, too, must be registered the caution that there is a limit which no one can transgress without being guilty of lying.

In business also a certain language is in vogue which, just as it sounds, is not in conformity with the truth; yet it can hardly be branded as a

lie, since everyone who is initiated in the ways of business knows in what sense the phrases are to be taken. No expert buyer unconditionally believes the salesman who declares that his goods are the very best in the world for the price, or that the vegetables were picked or the eggs laid that very day, or that, no matter where he goes, the customer will not make so good a bargain as is now offered him, etc. Business people have got in the habit of saying, and customers of accepting, these and similar assertions without attributing any particular weight or sense to them. Hence they can hardly be styled lies. This is not saying, however, that no real lies are told in business transactions. Many of them are told day for day, and some of them, for involving a serious loss to one of the parties, are mortal sins.

The Instrument of Mendacity

While lies have been told since the beginning of the world, in imitation of the lies in paradise that ruined us, it is claimed that today there are more lies told than ever before in the history of mankind. This is for the most part due, if it is a fact, to the telephone. Not only does this wonderful instrument give occasion to much more talking than was done previously, and to consequent lying that easily mingles with promiscuous conversation, but lying over the telephone is said to be much easier than lying straight to the

listener's face. In the personal presence of the other party, unless he is altogether confirmed and callous in the habit of mendacity, the liar easily betrays himself. He grows nervous, blushes against his will, or in some other way discloses that he is prevaricating. He does not need to fear these tell-tale symptoms when he is speaking over the telephone. Perhaps there is something to this contention after all.

“Yea, Yea: No, No”

The best way to avoid the ugly and harmful habit of lying is to follow closely the injunction of our Lord: “Let your speech be: Yea, Yea: No, No. And that which is over and above these is of evil” (Matt., 5, 37). Brevity is said to be the soul of wit. It may as well be said to be the mark of candor and veracity. It is when we start to make unnecessary excuses or superfluous apologies, or when we indulge in boasting, or aim to be interesting and captivating in our narratives of our own or others' adventures and experiences, that we are easily decoyed away from the royal path of truth. An additional safeguard of truthfulness is to behave so at all times that there is nothing in our conduct that needs to be diplomatically explained, excused or covered up; for this kind of diplomacy is closely aligned to downright mendacity. Happy the person who can have his answers as to his personal deportment always to be either: Yea, Yea; or No, No.

Hypocrisy

Closely allied to lying is hypocrisy, which is a lie in action or pantomime, since by means of it the hypocrite tries to make others believe he is what he is not, or is better than he is. Ordinarily hypocrisy is a venial sin of deceit and duplicity. In case it were used to ensnare someone into a serious loss or great trouble, it would be a mortal sin.

To cheat in school tasks and examinations by using disreputable methods in the way of copying from or being helped by others, or by illegitimately using so-called keys, ponies or similar sources of information is another form of untruthfulness in conduct. As a rule it, too, is only a venial sin. The same is to be said of eaves-dropping, by which one secretly and treacherously listens to a conversation that is not intended for him, and which would not be going on if the parties in question knew he was listening to it.

No Fair Peeping

We must judge in a similar manner of what is commonly called "peeping". Those who are addicted to it furtively observe others who are supposedly engaged in acts of strict privacy, and have no suspicion of being noticed. This kind of peeping is perfidious and craven, and not only bespeaks a morbid curiosity, but is usually inspired by even baser and more infamous motives.

Some time ago a gentleman in my presence was relating how a man, to prove his deftness with the bow and arrow, while standing in the rear of the theatre, shot the arrow into the peep-hole of the stage curtain which was hanging down. It chanced that his own brother was on the stage peeping through the hole in the curtain at the time, and the arrow struck him straight in the eye. This incident, by being rhetorically forced, could provide a moral against unjustified and uncharitable peeping. It recalls to me another episode, however, which will suit our purpose better.

Through the Key-Hole

In the "Monks of the West" by Montalembert there is a story of an Irish monk making a copy of a solitary bible in the choir of a monastery by night. He could not get the permission to copy the bible, and yet he wanted a copy for his monastery—I am telling the story by memory—and hence at night he stole into the choir of the monastery that possessed it in order to copy it unobserved. After he entered it he closed the doors of the choir carefully so no one could come upon him unawares.

One of the monks of the monastery which possessed the bible had a suspicion of what was going on. One night he softly approached the door of the choir to observe the copying monk

through the key-hole. He hardly had his eye well set on the hole and was just beginning to take in the situation clearly and easily, catching the other monk in the act, when suddenly a mysterious bird with a slender long beak appeared on the inside of the door, and thrusting its lengthy beak into the key-hole, gripped the peeping monk's eye and wrenched it completely out of its socket in punishment for his jealous peeping.

The Penalty

If a similar penalty were frequently meted out to peeping Toms or Janes, or if an ear were plucked from those who indulge in cowardly eaves-dropping, the malicious practices would be much discouraged. Now, alas, the punishment of the culprits is usually only of a moral and spiritual nature which, though infinitely worse than a corporal punishment, does not affect and arrest them so potently.

What is this moral and spiritual punishment? First of all the sins of uncharitableness which they perpetrate by their vile conduct. Furthermore their lowness and contemptibleness of character increase with every new addiction to the sin. Finally if they are not discovered in their despicable act, which they sometimes are, they grow more and more suspicious and distrustful of mankind in general, and render it increasingly hard for themselves to derive any

wholesome joy out of life at all. "Woe to them that are of a double heart" (Ecclus., 2, 14). "A double-minded man is inconstant in all his ways" (James, 1, 8).

The Mean Spy

The self-appointed spy, who closely watches the conduct of others to pick flaws in it, to ferret out their faults, and observe their lapses, in order to report them to their employers, superiors or well-wishers, to nullify their prestige and bring about their downfall so he himself may rise and prosper by their defeat, is worthy of utter contempt and undisguised execration. In his vileness of soul he does not shrink from abusing the sacred confidences and the familiar personal revelations of intimate friendship for the furtherance of his low and traitorous designs. He stops at no perfidy, so his selfish project is advanced. The spirit of Judas Iscariot seems to possess him, and usually his ultimate fate is not much unlike that of the miserable arch-traitor. He ends by being despised by God and by men.

Reading Another's Mail

Much akin to the repellent practices of eaves-dropping and peeping is the custom of unwarrantedly reading the letters of another. This shameful act is not only altogether foreign to the manners of a true gentleman or lady, but is

also very disingenuous, obnoxious and sinful. If it causes the injured party or other parties involved grievous pain or injury, it is a mortal sin. Parents and guardians have a certain right of supervision over the correspondence of their minor children, and consequently have not only the right, but also the duty, of inspecting it when they have reason to suspect harm or dangers to their children or wards.

Sensible parents, however, are not unduly jealous of this right in ordinary circumstances. They prefer to trust their adolescent children and allow them the privacy of their correspondence as long as they have no reason to fear it is running into dangerous channels. They rather have the children of their own accord acquaint them with the contents of the letters they write and receive, than subject them to a rigorous and narrow censorship, which often results in the children resenting parental interference in their correspondence, and resorting to clandestine methods of carrying it on unbeknowns to them.

Children who are of age, even though they remain at home, have a right, as long as they remain within reasonable bounds, to conduct their correspondence independently of parental supervision. Husbands and wives as such have no right to read the letters of their respective mates. And if they are wise and use common sense, they usually will regard one another's

correspondence sacred and inviolable. On the other hand, of their own free will they will gladly communicate the contents of their correspondence to one another save in such instances where there is question of a professional secret, or of the safeguarding of a third party's reputation, or of a prudential reserve aiming to keep peace in the family. Even candor must be seasoned with and guided by prudence.

Secrets

Without sufficient reason to reveal secrets entrusted to one's confidence, after one formally or virtually obligated himself to keep them, is a sin; and, in view of the great injury or pain inflicted upon the other party through the violation of the secret, it may be a mortal sin. This pertains especially to the unwarranted betrayal of professional secrets. Professional people, therefore, should carefully nurse the habit of scrupulously and jealously guarding, even as a sacred deposit, all the secrets directly or indirectly confided to them by their clients.

As to non-professional secrets, the best way to protect them is to entrust their keeping to no one but ourselves, save possibly to one or the other very loyal and trustworthy friend. A great deal of human wisdom is contained in the prudent advice of the Imitation, that we should be charitable towards all, but that for our friend we should

choose one out of thousand. And, alas, such is the weakness and unreliableness of human nature, that often this one out of a thousand proves to have been one too much, as far as the commitment of our secrets was concerned. We should have fared better had we kept our own counsel completely, and put all our trust in God alone.

Speaking of the tongue and the check we ought to place on it—"If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man" (James, 3, 2)—St. Basil makes a happy remark when he observes that, while God has given us two eyes, two ears, two hands, and two feet, He has given us only one tongue, so we can easier control it. Then, too, while He has surrounded the hands and feet with no protection, and the eyes only with the thin protection of the lids which serve mostly in sleep, He has provided the tongue with the double and strong protection of the teeth and lips, in order to give us every facility to hold the tongue in mastery. And yet, in spite of this wise and benign arrangement of Providence, "the tongue no man can tame, an unquiet evil, full of deadly poison" (James, 3, 8). In the following chapter we shall meet with more of this deadly poison engendered or propagated by the tongue.

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CHAPTER XX.

The Eighth Commandment

PART TWO

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

HNE'ER-DO-WELL was arrested for theft. The case against him looked threatening. His lawyer told him that the only rescue he saw was if his client could establish an alibi. The prisoner replied that it would be easy for him to induce two of his pals to swear that they had seen him elsewhere at the time of the theft, although in reality they had not seen him. The lawyer, a good and conscientious Catholic, demurred at this proposition saying, that the two witnesses by swearing falsely would incur grievous sin and expose themselves to the penalty of eternal hell-fire. "That will not matter," replied the culprit, "for they are going to hell anyway."

If anything, this story brings in relief the deplorable frivolity with which many people handle, or mishandle, the truth, and even a sacred oath. We know better. The Eighth Commandment contains a number of solemn obligations imposed

under pain of everlasting punishment, which it behoves no one to make light of. Some of these we have already considered. Several others we shall now proceed to investigate.

The Eighth Commandment is violated by sundry sins against justice, committed mostly in thought and word. Rash judgment and rash suspicion come to mind in this connection. You judge another rashly when without sufficient grounds you hold him guilty of a misdemeanor. When this judgment attains or is inspired by a high degree of uncharitableness, so that without any grounds whatever you declare another guilty of a grave and a seriously damaging fault, you commit a mortal sin. If, however, there appear to be some, although insufficient, grounds for your judgment; or if the fault you rashly impute to your neighbor is not grievous, you are guilty of venial sin.

You contract the guilt of rash suspicion when without adequate reasons you consider it likely that your neighbor has sinned. This suspicion, for the very reason that it is not definite and final, is hardly ever a mortal sin, unless in a given case one from sheer and gross malevolence would suspect another, without any evidence at all, of a very serious lapse against religion or virtue. In either case, if one manifests his rash judgment or rash suspicion to others, the sin is increased by the additional venom of defamation.

Our Lord's Warning

Our Lord gives every sensible Christian enough warning against these and similar sins when He says: "Judge not, that you may not be judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged: and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matt., 7, 1-3). If God has been gracious enough to let us shape His judgment over us by the manner in which we behave towards our neighbor, we should be careful to render His judgment considerate and sympathetic by having these qualities to reign supreme in our judgments over our fellowmen.

It is moreover a sin against the Eighth Commandment to indulge in uncharitable gossip. If you speak of the known faults of your neighbor with a certain interest and delight, but without any justifying grounds, you commit a sin of uncharitableness. Ordinarily this is only a venial sin. And when there is a good reason to speak of the known faults of another, so it is done charitably, it is no sin at all. Here the golden rule must again be invoked: "And as you would that men should do to you, do you also to them in like manner" (Luke, 6, 31).

They Discuss Your Faults

You would not be pleased if you knew that a group of your friends—it is usually among friends that an absent friend is sinisterly dealt with—

were intently occupied in discussing your known faults and foibles from various angles, not without evident pleasure and gratification. You would resent it bitterly. Why, then, not show others the same consideration you desire them to show you? Besides, few things make more for an enviable standing in the community, for peace of mind and true comfort of life, than the refraining from uncharitable remarks about those who are absent. The best way to prevent these remarks entirely is to avoid speaking of the absent in any way at all, even the most favorable.

A conversation may begin decidedly in favor of an absent one, but unless carefully watched, it will soon deteriorate and end by being positively in his disfavor. People as a rule seem to derive greater thrills of interest out of a conversation that brings out the shady side of others than from one that emphasizes what is to their credit. Hence it is advisable as much as possible to avoid personalities in our ordinary conversations and to select general topics of current events or travels or some favorite hobby, such as the radio or the automobile, as the subjects of our discourse. They are safer and more productive of valuable information; and what is more, their handling leaves no remorse in its wake, and no fear of a disruption of friendly relations in consequence of what may have been said.

The Golden Rule

Not long ago I happened to ask a young married woman if her former close and dear friendship with another young married woman still endured. Knowing both persons, I felt they would be close friends until death. She hesitated to answer, and then said: "Father, it is queer. But every time I like a person very much, someone comes along to tell me something against her, and then I can not be the same to her anymore." This reply did not bespeak a great deal of will-power and personal independence of mind; but it said volumes in explanation of why life on earth in general is not so sweet and happy as it might easily be, if the golden rule of charity were uniformly observed towards everybody by everybody.

The casual estrangement of ordinary friends is not the worst evil caused by uncharitable gossip. Many a person loses a splendid opportunity of marriage, others are deprived of a well-earned advancement in their career or of a profitable business bargain, others again suffer serious harm in their sweet and sacred domestic relations through the infernal machinations of venomous tongues. Sometimes, it is true, the aforesaid disastrous effects are due to mere indiscretion and garrulousness: as a rule, however, they are brought on advisedly by hostile, nefarious and perfidious attacks on the part of selfish, low and

evil-minded people, who often pretend to be the victim's well-wishers and friends.

False Brethren

In recounting the great tribulations of his life St. Paul mentions his afflictions accruing from false brethren in the same sentence with the perils of robbers and the perils in the sea (2 Cor., 11, 26). Often the former are more destructive of life's peace than the latter. There is considerable cold knowledge of human nature implied in the cynic's prayer: "Lord, preserve me from my friends. I will take care of my enemies." The false brethren and disloyal friends hurt us more than our professed enemies can harm us. Our Lord tells us that "a man's enemies shall be they of his own household" (Matt., 10, 36). The most terrible instance of this with reference to Himself was foretold by Jesus, saying: "He that dippeth his hand with Me in the dish"—one of His most intimate associates—"he shall betray Me" (Matt., 26, 23).

If one were to inject a great deal of rancor into a conversation against an absent person, even though only the known faults of this person were discussed, so that he would seriously alienate his hearers against the person, he would be guilty of mortal sin. If one unnecessarily and uncharitably mentions a person's known faults in his

presence, to his humiliation and chagrin, he commits a sin. And this sin is serious if the pain inflicted on the victim is grievous.

Sarcasm and Ridicule

Sarcasm, whether directed against the present or the absent, usually contains a note of uncharitableness more or less culpable. Whilst it usually bespeaks a keen and ready mind, sarcasm ordinarily reveals a cold and bitter heart. It is all in all a very dangerous gift which tempts its possessor to many and various excursions against charity, often victimizing his best friends and patrons, and alienating them as a result. The same is true of ridicule which is closely allied to sarcasm.

Not infrequently sarcasm is an indication of weakness and cowardice of character. What a person hesitates to say openly and clearly, for fear of being challenged and held to account, he says in a veiled and furtive manner, dealing in ambiguous insinuations and intimations, which he sends adrift without any regard to others' feelings, merely to satisfy some morbid envy, vanity, jealousy or vindictiveness that are breeding in his heart. Many an able and brilliant man has lost what prestige he had gained through much good effort, and has succeeded in making himself generally disliked through the misuse of

the perilous gift of sarcasm. How much more agreeable and beneficial his life would be if he would do unto others as he desires them to do unto him!

Let By-Gones Be By-Gones

Needlessly and idly to resuscitate and rehash old charges against a person, which were well known to the public years ago, but which have been almost entirely forgotten through lapse of time, is often more than uncharitable gossip, since it borders on detraction for revealing faults which are in reality unknown to the present generation. If there were more charity in the world, practically all the gossip that is unfavorable to the reputation of others, whether founded on facts or not, would soon die of inanition and be relegated into oblivion, much to the improvement of human happiness, instead of being perpetuated through meanness and vileness to the discomfort of the individuals concerned, and the diminution of peace and contentment all round. Here, too, the golden rule should come steadily and generally into play. Let disagreeable by-gones be by-gones, your own as well as those of others.

To sin by detraction means to reveal without justification the hidden faults of another. It is a mortal or venial sin dependently upon the harm done another through the ruination of his good

name. If he suffers much harm, the sin is grievous; if he suffers but slight harm, it is venial. Of course if one, in manifesting another's hidden faults, has the intention to inflict great damage upon him, the sin is mortal regardless of the size of the damage actually accruing to the party. On the other hand, if one heedlessly and thoughtlessly spreads the knowledge of another's faults or sins without any intention of harming him, he very likely commits only a venial sin, even if beyond his intention and against his will serious harm should ensue for the injured person.

When Revelation Is Justified

Just as there are occasions in which it is not sinful charitably to discuss the known faults of others, there are also circumstances which justify the prudent and charitable revelation of the hidden faults of others. The law of charity itself, either towards a third party, or the community at large, or even towards the person himself whose faults are being divulged, not seldom provides this justification. If you knew a young man was positively vicious and treacherous, you could advise a young lady whom he was trying to ensnare that he was an undesirable character; and there could be times when you were in conscience bound to give this advice irrespective of the loss of the young man's reputation.

A Thief

If you had personal evidence that a domestic was dishonest, you would have a right and frequently the duty to counsel another lady, who was about to hire her, against engaging her, because of her thievery. If a person is a distinct menace to the morals or the religion of an entire community, he should at once be reported to the proper authorities for correction and elimination, no matter how his personal reputation may suffer. The weal of the community has precedence over the regard due to the good name of a confirmed crook, scoundrel or libertine.

In the interest of the guilty party himself the revelation of his faults to the respective authority, say of a boy's misdemeanors to his father or mother, in a discreet and kindly way, is often the greatest charity that can be shown him. Here, however, the laws of fraternal correction, laid down by our Savior Himself, and of which mention has been made in a previous chapter, must be jealously observed, in order that the remedy may not be worse than the malady it is designed to cure.

For the purpose of obtaining consolation and guidance it is lawful to manifest the faults of another, even of a superior, charitably withal, to one's confessor or some other prudent person, who will not divulge the story to others.

Calumny or Slander

Calumny or slander is a greater sin than detraction inasmuch as it implies the imputation of faults or sins to one's neighbor of which he is not guilty, at least not in the manner and degree imputed to him. If through calumny you inflict serious harm upon another's good name, you are guilty of mortal sin: if the injury is slight, it is a venial sin. Both detraction and calumny can be perpetrated indirectly. Even as you can damn someone by faint praise, as the poet says, so you can hurt another's reputation by a certain kind of a damning smile, a leer of the eyes, a significant gesture, a shrug of the shoulders, insinuating silence, or some other mannerism that is indicative of suspicion, innuendo or contempt.

When calumny or detraction are pursued in the very presence of the victim, the sin of insult or contumely is added to the other. It, too, is grievous or slight, dependently upon the nature of the injury done or intended. As a rule the very calumny and detraction are more poignant and deadly in this instance, since they assume the character of brazenness and bravado, and are consequently more likely to make a deep impression upon the hearers. Of the sin of verbal insult and opprobrious attacks mention was made in the discussion of the Fifth Commandment.

Backbiting, Talebearing, Whispering

Backbiting, talebearing and whispering are frequently used to mean either uncharitable gossip, or detraction, or slander. Yet one particular phase of talebearing deserves to be animadverted upon in this connection. It is the mean, craven and ugly practice of those who listen to someone decrying another and inveighing against him. They not only encourage the speaker by showing interest in the tirade, but they also draw him out and make him more animated by certain questions or remarks that provoke additional bitterness and venom. Everything they hear they carefully store away in their memory.

Then they hasten to use the first opportunity that offers itself—and if none offers itself, they make one in their malicious ingenuity—to tell the censured party everything the speaker declaimed against said party. Usually they give the reported words, in order to make them sound more hateful, a different setting, tone or color; and they exaggerate and distort their pretended quotations in such a manner as to arouse great anger and bitter animosity in the party they tell the tale to.

By this perfidious behavior the best and sweetest friendships are not seldom rent asunder forever and make room for relentless hatred and endless strife. These talebearers are literally the snake in the grass that convert a paradise of love in a

family, among relatives, neighbors or friends, into a hell of mutual distrust, aversion and abomination. In such cases, which are by no means rare, talebearing is evidently a mortal sin. If only slight displeasure is caused by it, it is a venial sin.

For the Present

A young nun related to me a ludicrous experience she had on her first mission. She was appointed to teach the first elementary grade, the so-called baby-room, which pleased her much. One of the mothers brought her first-born boy to school, and she had quite a number of explanations to make and advices to give as she introduced the child to the Sister. She talked so profusely that the Sister, pitying the child, said to the boy, as she assigned him to a bench: "You sit here for the present."

In the afternoon of the same day the mother came with him again, quite excited. She explained that the boy came home crying, and very much hurt, declaring he would never go back to school. When she asked him why not, he replied angrily: "That Sister tells lies. She told me she would give me a present; but she did not give me anything." At first the little nun did not get the connection. Finally she recalled that she had told the boy to sit down for the present.

It was a laughable misconception placed upon good words, and a consequent misquotation

of them, on the part of a simple and ignorant child; hence altogether excusable. In this regard many grown-ups are like this child with the difference that their misinterpretations and misquotations are often due not to simplicity and ignorance, but to downright treachery and malevolence.

The Concealed Weapon

It is against the laws of the states of our country for anyone to carry concealed weapons without proper authorization. Yet there are ever so many people, Catholics not excepted, who carry a most deadly weapon about with them wherever they go. It is more destructive than a loaded revolver, and more lethal than the strongest poison. It is their unbridled and venomous tongue. Of them the Bible says: "They have whetted their tongues like a sword" (Ps. 63, 4). They swing this sharp and ruinous sword right and left without any regard to the havoc they cause to reputations, friendships and kindly relations among men. They prefer to stab their victims in the back, while these are unaware of the attack made upon them in their absence and, consequently, not in a position to defend themselves against their cowardly aggressors.

Speakers and Listeners

While the uncharitable speakers are the first offenders in this matter, they who listen to them

in an endorsing, encouraging and heartening way are equally guilty. To quote again a Father of the Church, the former have the devil on their tongue, while the latter have him in their ears. If one from mere courtesy listens to ordinary uncharitable gossip, or even to detraction or calumny in a way that bespeaks no encouragement whatever for the speaker, nor any endorsement of what is being said, he commits no sin.

There are times, however, when one is in duty bound to check at once such unfair talk; a father or mother, for example, would have to stop such conversations on the part of their children. But in ordinary crowds one can not easily assume this authority; and if he assumed and exercised it he might do more harm to himself and others than what he is aiming to avert. Hence the indirect method of discouraging such talk is usually preferable.

Show by your manner that such talk, far from interesting or fascinating you, actually displeases and disgusts you. Cleverly lead the conversation into some other channel that is innocent, if you find an opportunity of doing so. Or, if there is no other remedy, employ some excuse to get away from the company whose conversation does not spare the absent one. Your leaving will be a silent but eloquent protest against such un-Christian conduct. You will have less sympathy for the feelings of these uncharitable people

the less they display for the feelings of others, and the more you are convinced that the very ones who love to rail against the absent ones in your presence will not fail to censure, belittle and vilify you when you are absent from their company. Bishop Neumann of Philadelphia stopped malicious gossips by saying, as soon as they started on an absent person: "Let us pray the rosary for that poor person at once."

What must have great force in restraining every thinking Christian from all kinds of uncharitable talk is the obligation attaching to those who commit these sins of repairing the injury done to the good name of others and whatever harm ensued from it. No one can be absolved from his sins against charity and justice unless he has made, or is sincerely willing to make, as soon as the opportunity presents itself, this required reparation. The method of making it depends upon the particular nature of the sins that begot the duty of making it.

If one has ruined another's prestige in the community through detraction, he can not recall what he said by pleading that he told a lie, for in reality he merely told the truth. Hence he must try in other ways, say by bringing out the favorable traits of character of the injured one, to undo the harm he did. The slanderer, however, if he wants to make good the loss he inflicted upon another, must retract what he said, even at the price of exposing himself as a mean liar,

if this is necessary to restore the ruined good name of his victim. The talebearer, who blasted a sweet friendship or an agreeable relationship between others by his infamous whisperings, must do all in his power to readjust the peace and harmony he destroyed.

It is evident that in every case this reparation is difficult and embarrassing to the one who has to make it, and costs him immensely more trouble and pain than his sins afforded him morbid pleasure and joy. People are eager and credulous listeners, as a rule, when another is attacked and maligned. But they are usually just as indifferent and incredulous, when something is said in another's favor, particularly when it is said with the purpose of reparation. In a word, it is seldom that the reparation completely undoes the injury done. In view of this sensible Christians beware, and they demur to contract, for a passing moment's questionable delight, an obligation they may never be able to meet.

The Pillow of Feathers

It is an old legend of a holy abbot who one day, whilst a terrible hurricane was raging, asked one of the monks to take a pillow of feathers, carry it to the top of the church tower, slit it open, and give the feathers to the winds. When the monk reported that he had done as he was told, the abbot bade him go and gather everyone of

those feathers into the pillow again, sew it shut, and bring it to him.

At this suggestion the obedient monk went into sheer despair, saying: "Father Abbot, with the best will I can not recover all those feathers. The wild winds have carried them throughout the whole country, and while I go after one the others will be sure to get away from me." "You are right," replied the abbot; "but I just wanted to give you and the entire community an illustration of the swift and wild spread of the defamation of another. It is carried by the winds of evil gossip, and ere you are conscious of it, it has covered the whole territory, and it will be impossible to recall it, and properly to disclaim or discount it, so the damage done by it is entirely repaired."

The fact alone, that the greatest crime in history, the murder of the God-Man, was brought about by calumny and vilification, should set every lover of Jesus Christ definitely against sins that can have so woeful an issue. The words of St. James are to the point: "If any man think himself to be religious, not bridling his tongue, . . . this man's religion is vain" (James, 1, 26). "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man" (James, 3, 2).

An Ingenious Apostle

A very kind-hearted man pursued his own manner of apostolic work. His virtuous hobby

was the reconciliation of enemies. He went about it in an ingenious and successful manner. When he learned that two of his acquaintances were at odds with one another, he would approach one of them and cleverly guide the conversation upon the other party. The accosted one would at first utter many bitter things against his enemy, but gradually under the skilful guidance of his interviewer he would admit that his enemy had certain good qualities and lovable traits.

The man hurried to report this part of the conversation to the enemy, whose heart thawed under the influence of it, and he in his turn would begin to own that his enemy, too, had certain likable parts and winning ways. Our hero would return to the first one and tell him this good report in his masterful and ingratiating manner.

The result was that when the two enemies met they were full of mutual kindness and good feeling. They became better and faster friends than they had been before they became estranged. The man who brought them together simply used tactics that are the very opposite to those employed by the uncharitable whisperer or tale-bearer. And the results of his conduct were as favorable and happy for everyone concerned as the results of talebearing are baneful and disastrous. Of him and his like our Savior declared in His first sermon: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt., 5, 9).

CHAPTER XXI.

The Precepts of the Church

"O how have I loved Thy law, O Lord! it is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 118, 97).

IN discussing the commandments of God there was occasion, every now and then, to treat of one or the other precept of the Church. Those precepts that have not been touched upon now require our attention.

The first precept, commanding us to hear Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation, was dealt with in the chapter on the Third Commandment of God. The second precept, which bids us to fast and abstain on the days appointed, calls for some elucidation. Every Catholic who has attained the age of seven years, and who is not duly exempt or excused from the observance of the law, is bound under pain of mortal sin to abstain from the use of flesh meat on all the Fridays of the year, which are not holydays of obligation, as well as on all the other days of abstinence occurring throughout the year. Such days of abstinence are the ember days and the vigils of Christmas, Pentecost, the Assumption of our Lady, and All Saints. The Wednesdays

in lent are usually days of abstinence in our country; so is Holy Saturday until noon.

The Law of Fasting

All Catholics, who have completed their twenty-first, but not their fifty-ninth year, unless they are legitimately excused, are bound under pain of grievous sin to fast on the days appointed by the Church. To fast in the sense of this law means to eat but one full meal a day. The manner of fasting, as to what is and what is not allowed with reference to it, is usually clearly outlined in the annual diocesan lenten regulations.

As each diocese has its own regulations regarding abstinence and fasting, which regulations are invariably published at the beginning of each lent, it is the part of a conscientious Catholic to acquaint himself thoroughly with these regulations and take them as a norm for his conduct.

Since the laws of fasting and abstinence are positive laws of the Church, they do not bind under great inconvenience. The Church is a thoughtful mother and does not intend to burden her children with more than they can reasonably bear. Whenever, therefore, the observance of these laws would cause serious hardship, they cease to bind for that very reason. If the case is clear, for instance in the event of grievous illness, you may act on your own judgment. If there is

any doubt in the matter, either get a declaration or dispensation from your confessor or pastor.

Few People Fast

Nowadays in our country, with the intense activity and consequent nervousness and sickliness of many of its inhabitants, comparatively few people seem to be bound to fast. I heard of a pastor of a large parish who, after he had read and explained the lenten regulations and the various reasons for exemption and dispensation, ended by saying: "After all you have now heard, my dear people, it seems that about the only one who has to fast in this parish is the pastor, who appears to be about the only man of leisure among us." He was speaking humorously, of course. The general exemption is not quite so sweeping as all that.

There are still, however many may be exempt, a considerable number of Catholics who are both able and bound to fast. If one is certain that he is exempt from the law, he does not have to fast. If one is in doubt whether he must fast or not, he should apply for a declaration or dispensation, as was said above. But he should make this application not after lent is over, but before it begins, so he can spend lent with a clear conscience.

Fasting Is Hygienic

Moderate and reasonable fasting, as the Church asks us to perform, far from being injurious to the health of the body, is rather a support and promoter of good health. As was observed in the chapter on the Fifth Commandment, more people shorten their lives through excessive eating than through intemperate drinking. As the common saying is, they dig their graves with their teeth.

If our Catholic people would fast as conscientiously from motives of religion as people of the world fast from motives of vanity, to keep or recover a nice, slender and graceful bodily form, the souls of our people would be in a splendid condition and look most beautiful and winsome in the sight of God. Perhaps in no era of the world have reducing treatments been so much in vogue and have vitamins and calories been so generally and vividly discussed as today. Virtuous fasting is the best reducing treatment ever discovered, for the body as well as for the soul. Whoever is addicted to it in a sensible way is hardly ever bothered by having to attend minutely to the vitamins and calories entering his system, either in a corporal or spiritual sense. In a word, he ordinarily has a healthy soul in a sound body.

One Full Meal

Against the laws of fasting and abstaining one sins grievously or venially according to the degree

of his violation of the respective laws. If one who is bound to fast wilfully eats more than one full meal on a fast day, he commits a mortal sin: whereas, if in addition to the one full meal he exceeds the allowance made by the Church, yet without attaining the limit of a second full meal, either simultaneously or in the aggregate, he sins venially.

Similarly, in regard to the violation of abstinence, if one eats just a little meat, say less than two ounces, he is guilty of venial sin. If he eats two ounces or more, he commits a serious sin. Here it is worthy of notice that soup or vegetables cooked with meat, even after the meat has been extracted, may not be eaten on Friday; much less meat broth or beef tea. Yet, after the meat is removed from them, the consumption of such soup or foods in ordinary quantities is only a venial sin. It may also be observed that hard labor, though it exempts one from the law of fasting, does not of itself excuse one from the law of abstinence, on Friday, for instance.

Explanations

If one is not bound to fast, for being under twenty-one years of age, for example, he may eat meat as often as he chooses on days when meat is allowed at the principal meal for those who have to fast. Whenever meat is allowed, fish and

oysters and any other food may be partaken of with it at the same meal.

Children and Old People

Children under seven years of age, no matter how bright they may be, may eat meat on any day whatsoever, Fridays not excepted. But old people are not exempt from the law of abstinence for their age only. If age, however, is accompanied by illness or great weakness, as is often the case, exemption from the law may be invoked without a scruple. In doubtful cases regarding abstinence and fasting it is prudent to confer with one's pastor without hesitation and delay, since the Church gives him authority over these laws in individual cases of doubt for the very reason that he may use it in favor of the peace of mind of those who are entrusted to his care.

Weighing Sins by Ounces

It may strike some as odd that mortal and venial sins appear to be weighed by ounces, as it were on an apothecary's scale, as in the instance of eating meat on Friday: two ounces constitute a mortal sin; less than two ounces a venial sin. A little reflection, however, will enable one to see the reasonableness of the distinction. The law in itself is important or grave. Yet it seems preposterous to declare one guilty of mortal sin

and eternal hell-fire for eating just a tiny bit of meat or merely tasting it, without justification, as we are supposing. Still there must be a limit somewhere. The Church leaves it to the theologians to fix this limit; and they have practically agreed on two ounces in this case.

In many other phases of life, of civil as well as of religious life, we note the same or similar distinctions, and find them entirely reasonable. Before a young man is twenty-one, say a day before, he is of himself incapable of making a civil contract that is binding. As soon as he is twenty-one, he is able to make all sorts of contracts. And yet there is only the difference of a single day. You find another resemblance in the distinction between petit and grand larceny, involving a prison or penitentiary offense, respectively. A slight sum of fifty cents may turn the one into the other.

According to canon law a girl who is fourteen years old minus a day can not marry. After another day, however, she can enter into the most solemn and momentous contract of life. The same applies to the ages of girls and boys specified by the laws of the respective states as the minimum ages for marriage, as far as the civil law is concerned. Considering all this, the weighing of mortal and venial sins according to ounces no longer appears absurd or puerile. The Church is

a divine institution, but being ordained for the salvation of human beings, it has to deal with them in a human way.

Tobacco, Candy, Shows

Although comparatively few people are bound to fast in our country, every good and salvation-hungry Catholic is careful to substitute some other good work of prayer, almsgiving or mortification for the fast he is unable to observe. Some go to holy Mass on every fast day; others abstain from the use of spirituous liquors, tobacco, candy, shows, dancing, or some other thing or practice of which they are very fond; others make up for their lack of fasting by giving substantial alms to a pious or charitable cause. The spirit of true piety is inventive and never fails to suggest and devise some good possible act in place of one that circumstances render impossible or, at least, highly inconvenient.

Everyone who has the true spirit of lent endeavors to attend lenten services regularly, and to fast or abstain from sin in every shape and form. This is after all the best and most meritorious kind of fasting. Yet no one will be an adept in this manner of spiritual fasting, unless he assiduously practices bodily mortification according to his ability, in imitation of the Apostle who says: "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to

others, I myself should become a castaway” (1 Cor., 9, 27).

Once a Year

The third precept of the Church enjoins that we should confess our sins at least once a year. If one is not conscious of having committed a mortal sin, he is not bound by this precept. When one knows he has committed a grievous sin he must go to confession at least once a year. He does not have to make this confession during the Easter period, however, unless it should be necessary for him to receive his Easter Communion worthily. Say one went to confession before the Easter time began, and received holy Communion in the Easter season: he would comply with the precepts of the Church in this regard.

While the Church merely ordains that we should confess at least once a year and, in the fourth precept, that we should receive Holy Eucharist in the Easter period, it is still the ardent desire of the Church that both these sacraments be received frequently by all Catholics who have attained the use of reason. Nowadays Catholics, who want to take no chances with their soul's eternal welfare, make it a practice to receive these sacraments worthily at least once a month; many receive them every week; and there are not a few who, thank God, comply with the

Church's urgent counsel and receive holy Communion every day.

In the first part of this book the advantages of frequent confession have been expatiated on at length. What was said there of the value of frequent confession applies in the same, or rather, in a higher degree, to frequent Communion. If the reader desires to know the author's views relative to the wonderful profit of frequent Communion, he will find them in his book entitled "Forty Hours".

From Europe to New York

As to the very precarious custom of those who approach the holy table but once a year it is worthy of remark that, while it is theoretically possible to be saved through annual Communion, the likelihood in a way resembles that of the endeavor to fly across the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to America in an airplane. It is possible to make the trip and land safely on the American shore; but the odds are heavily against the success of the enterprise, as the statistics of the past year amply and sadly prove. Where one succeeds, a number of others, against the most careful precautions, fail.

Just so will it happen with those who rely on one holy Communion annually to transport their souls from earth to heaven at death. One

or the other may possibly succeed with this meager provision and land safe in eternity, whereas by far the greater number of those who undergo so great and terrible a hazard will fall hopelessly into the depths of everlasting darkness and unending despair.

A rather stout lady was jestingly asked by her friends if she did not have an itch to take a ride in an aeroplane. She replied that she had made up her mind she would not travel in an airship until they repealed a certain law. "What law?" she was asked. "The law of gravity," she answered. The soul follows the law of spiritual gravity as well as the body obeys the law of physical gravity. And if the soul is burdened with mortal sin, at death, which it runs every risk of being if it receives the Bread of the Strong but once a year, it will be drawn by the inexorable law of spiritual gravity into the pit of nameless confusion and endless tortures.

The Step-Child

The fifth precept of the Church which charges us to contribute to the support of our pastors is often treated, even by pretendedly good and devout Catholics, as a sort of a step-child among the precepts, or as a mere ornament of a certain page of the catechism. It seems to mean nothing to them. If they give it any attention at all, this attention, instead of being warm, spontaneous, wholehearted

and generous, is forced, reluctant, stinted and miserly. They contribute to the support of their pastor, which includes the support and furtherance of religion in general, only under compulsion, and as little as possible. They give barely enough to appear as giving and thereby escape public censure. If everyone in proportion gave only as much as they, there would be neither Catholic churches nor Catholic priests for lack of proper support.

Still these Catholics believe, and want others to believe, that they are pious and religious. They are in a way. They would not miss Mass on a Sunday or holyday of obligation, or eat meat on Friday unjustifiedly, for anything in the world. Yet the fifth precept of the Church, which is as important and binding as are those two precepts—for if it is not observed by Catholics in general, there will soon be no more Mass to hear for want of priests and churches—they transgress without remorse or shame.

He Got Ten Cents

In their niggardliness these drones remind one of the little boy of four years whom his father took to Mass with him. As they came out of church the boy said to his father: "Papa, what did you get?" The father did not catch the drift of his son's question when the boy said: "I got ten cents out of the basket the man was passing around."

They, too, would rather take from than give to the church. They should "remember the word of the Lord Jesus, how He said: It is a more blessed thing to give, rather than to receive" (Acts, 20, 35).

They Are Slackers

It never occurs to these slackers to accuse themselves in the confessional of this transgression, although in more instances than one it constitutes a mortal sin, because the party in question is grossly remiss in doing his duty of supporting the Church. Regarding such a Catholic one is justified in paraphrasing the words of St. James (1, 26) thus: "If any man think himself to be religious"—not contributing to the support of the Church—"but deceiving his own heart, this man's religion is vain."

By far the majority of so-called practical Catholics in our country, however, conscientiously do their duty and more with reference to the fifth precept of the Church; otherwise the Church would not be prospering and advancing as it is. While many of our good rich Catholics are visibly thankful to God for the earthly prosperity with which He has blessed them, and are magnanimously liberal towards religion and charity, still the greater part of the maintenance of the Church is carried cheerfully and nobly by the Catholics of the middle and poorer classes, who by their

regular and solid contributions make it possible for the priests to live and religion to thrive.

The Widow's Mites

The edifying and inspiring spectacle which our Lord one day witnessed in the temple is repeated, although not in so obvious a manner, day for day in our churches the country over. St. Mark relates it briefly as follows: "And Jesus sitting over against the treasury, beheld how people cast money into the treasury, and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she cast in two mites, which make a farthing. And calling His disciples together, He saith to them: Amen I say to you, this poor widow hath cast in more than all they who have cast into the treasury. For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want cast in all she had, even her whole living" (Mark, 12, 41-44).

Regarding Holy Marriage

The sixth precept of the Church contains certain laws referring to marriage and its solemnization. It forbids mixed marriages, and marriages between those who are related in the forbidden degrees of kindred. It prohibits clandestine marriages, or marriages without the presence of the required witnesses, and it disallows marriages to be solemnized in the so-called closed time.

Regarding mixed marriages and marriage in general the author has written many pages in his "Youth's Pathfinder" in the interest of young people who are contemplating marriage; and many pages, too, in his "Plain Talks on Marriage", in behalf of those who are already married or are on the point of being married. He begs to refer his readers who are interested in the subject to those books. Here he merely desires to state that for Catholics the Church is the only organ which has jurisdiction to make laws respecting the essence or substance of marriage.

The reason is evident. For His followers Christ elevated the natural contract of marriage to the dignity of a sacrament. The Church alone has the power to declare what is and what is not a sacrament. Hence the state, while it may insist on the observance of certain formalities in regard to the contracting of marriage, for instance the possession of a license to be married, the report of the marriage to the county clerk, etc., it can not declare licit or illicit, valid or invalid, any marriage entered into by Catholics. The Church alone can do this, and it alone can formulate the conditions of a valid and licit marriage.

The Soul's Hygiene

It must be borne in mind, however, that whatever laws the Church makes, whether it be with reference to marriage or any other phase of Chris-

tian life, are made not from whim or caprice, but with an eye to the present and future welfare of the ones who are bidden to observe these laws. Catholics not seldom overlook this purpose. Somehow they think they are asked to do the Church a favor by observing this or that law, say the law of contributing towards the support of religion, or the law against mixed marriages: whereas these very laws contain a great blessing for the parties for whom they are enacted. Even as sensible laws of quarantine or hygiene in general are not fanciful and capricious, but very wholesome and beneficial, made as they are to protect and save the subjects of them; so too all the laws of God and the Church aim ultimately to procure and secure the welfare of those who are asked to obey them.

Regarding the observance of the laws of God and the laws of the Church, which speaks in the Name of God, the first words of the first Psalm are noteworthy: "Blessed is the man who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the chair of pestilence. But his will is in the law of the Lord, and His law he shall meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth its fruit, in due season. And his leaf shall not fall off: and all whatsoever he shall do shall prosper" (Ps. 1, 1-3).

CHAPTER XXII.

General Confession

*"I will recount to Thee all my years
in the bitterness of my soul" (Isa.,
38, 15).*

IN the review of the commandments of God and the precepts of the Church we have touched upon practically all the sins which Catholics in the common walks of life are liable to in their daily conduct. In order to know what sins you have done and are bound to say in the confessional you must examine your conscience from the time of your last worthy confession.

If you are sure that your past confession or confessions have been unworthy and consequently invalid, either through lack of candor or sorrow, or because you were crassly negligent in examining your conscience, or telling your sins, in your next confession you must cover again the entire period comprised by those null confessions, telling all your mortal sins according to kind, number and those circumstances that involve additional mortal sins, together with the sacrileges of unworthy confessions and Communions.

If you are not sure, but only in doubt, regarding the validity of your past confessions, you need not repeat them or mention a word about them in your next confession, since they are included in your ordinary recital of sins, as has been explained in a previous chapter. If you are not scrupulous, you may make mention of the fact that you have this doubt, in order to obtain greater peace of mind; but if you are inclined to scrupulosity, you will do best by paying no attention whatever to your doubts in the matter, and by abiding humbly by the directions of your confessor.

Neither the First, Nor the Worst

In case you are conscious that all or some of your past confessions have been sacrilegious, do not hesitate to right them at the first opportunity. You owe this to yourself for the peace of your mind and, mainly, for the salvation of your soul. Do not fear the priest or his possible opinion of you because of this revelation on your part. Hardly any experience in the confessional consoles the priest so vividly and edifies him so potently as an humble, contrite and candid general confession. Again, yours will neither be the first nor by any means the worst general confession the priest has heard.

Human nature is universal in its manifestations, and there are no phases of it in your spiritual life—

impregnated though nature be with grace—that are not duplicated ever so often in the lives of others. Just as you fear the priest may be shocked because he never suspected your conscience to be in such a frightful mess, so there may easily be fine people of your own acquaintance who are troubled with the same or a worse confusion of conscience than you are, although you would never even distantly suspect them of it, since all you do is to envy them for their apparent peace of mind and joy of heart in religion.

“O Lord, Save Me!”

Whatever you do, get rid of your sacrilegious condition of conscience at the very first opportunity. Go to any confessor you please, but go to someone at once. The confession will not be nearly so hard and bitter as you imagine. And what bitterness and humiliation it will contain you ought to bear gladly in atonement of the sacrileges you have perpetrated. Say bravely with the prophet: “I will recount to Thee all my years in the bitterness of my soul. . . . Behold in peace is my bitterness most bitter: but Thou hast delivered my soul that it should not perish; Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back. For hell shall not confess to Thee, neither shall death praise Thee: nor shall they that go down into the pit, look for Thy truth. The living, the living, he shall give praise to Thee, as I do

this day. . . . O Lord, save me, and we will sing our psalms all the days of our life in the house of the Lord" (Isa., 38, 15, 17-20).

Sixty or Seventy Years

It affects a priest most sadly when he hears the confession of an aged person, say of sixty or seventy years, who has approached the sacred tribunal regularly every month or fortnight, but who finally admits that all or very many of his confessions have been sacrilegious, due to the fact that he wilfully, through shame or fear, concealed a mortal sin in childhood or early youth. Instead of rectifying this confession right away, he added to the malignity of his spiritual disorder by adding sacrilege upon sacrilege, from mere human respect, living in bitter remorse of conscience the while, and depriving himself of all the joys and consolations of religion to which his otherwise good will and pious life seemed to entitle him.

At each confession the unfortunate sinner tried to muster enough courage to reveal his whole past, but at the decisive moment his will-power invariably failed him, and his spiritual wound festered more in consequence. The longer he put off the adjustment of his conscience, the harder it seemed to grow. Finally, towards the very end of his life, he yields unflinchingly to the call of grace and the voice of good sense, and

decides to make a clean breast of it all, cost what it will. He goes through with it, and finds immediate, continuous and sweet relief. Then he blames himself for his inexcusable folly which kept him away so many years from God and grace and happiness of soul.

This revelation, I say, saddens the priest who reflects how many years this poor, benighted penitent spent in utter spiritual misery and woe, when he might as well, with just a little judgment and self-effacement, have made them years of great spiritual solace and delight.

An Aching Tooth

Such a fatuous man is not unlike the patient who is troubled with an aching tooth. It bothers him day and night. It renders him incapable of enjoying life, of doing his work with zest and success, and of being himself, as they say, all round. He makes up his mind to go to the dentist to have his tooth treated and the pain eliminated. He dreads the momentary pain in the dentist's chair, however. He goes to the dentist's office. When about to open the door of the doctor's office, his courage gives way, and he returns home with his ugly pain.

Soon, goaded by the continuous and increasing ache, he resolves once more to go to the dentist. This time he may get into the dentist's chair. But no sooner he sees the doctor grasping an

instrument his heart weakens, he leaps from the chair and again returns home with his terrible pain. Meanwhile the tooth is getting worse rather than better, and the ache of it is hardly bearable anymore.

The Anaesthetic

Finally the stupid patient goes to the dentist again and lets him treat the tooth, whatever the pain will be. After the treatment is over, he is surprised that, because of the anaesthetic employed, it caused him little or no pain. He congratulates himself on the immense relief he experiences from his previous plight. At the same time he realizes how foolish he has been in postponing so easy and sweet a relief from a mere childish fear.

The procedure in the spiritual life of one who ill-advisedly postpones from month to month and from year to year a necessary general confession is about the same. So are his cure and the effects of it. The anaesthetic employed in the confessional, to relieve or entirely kill the pain of humble self-revelation, is the grace of God. This grace not only deadens every pain, but even renders the process of self-annihilation through an open confession sweet and replete with heavenly consolation, so that the penitent actually enjoys telling on himself, the more the better, in propitiation for all his offenses against God.

Many Buttons

It happens at times that one or two confessions of the past life have been invalid, whereas the subsequent ones, without any formal correction of the unworthy ones, were valid. To use a common illustration to explain this, let us say you close a long coat with numerous buttons. You miss a button at the top. This ordinarily would throw out of order every subsequent buttoning. Yet casually you skip a buttonhole and you get right again with your buttoning and remain so all the way down. Just a few buttonings are wrong in the entire line.

This would happen in the case of one or more invalid confessions which escaped the penitent's memory entirely. He would proceed to confess as well and sincerely as he was able. These confessions would be worthy, of course; and they would also include and wipe out the sins and sacrileges of the unworthy confessions; for whenever one mortal sin is forgiven, all are and must be forgiven. In case the penitent never again remembers, through no fault of his, the sacrilegious confessions, no harm will be done, and they will not stand in the way of his salvation. If he remembers them, however, he needs only to repeat the confessions that were actually unworthy, and add the number of sacrileges he committed. The other confessions which he made in good faith were to all appearances worthy, and he is not obliged to make them over.

They Were Children

It is also of quite common occurrence that good people, advancing in years and spirituality, are somewhat worried about certain incidents of their childhood or youth. When they were quite young they did things with themselves or other children that were not nice. If they did them today, with their better and clearer knowledge of good and bad, they would be quite sinful. But then they were mere children and had only hazy and imperfect notions of the sinfulness of their act. At any rate they were afraid to mention it to the priest at the time, and they really have never made mention of it since. They are more or less uneasy about it at times.

If this is your case, and you are not scrupulous, it may be advisable to submit the matter to the priest in your next confession by saying, for instance: "Father, I wish to mention that long ago, when I was a little child, I was guilty of impure conduct with myself or other children, of the same or the opposite sex"—if it was a close relative, say a brother or sister, it will be good to mention it—; "I am not sure that it was a mortal sin for me at the time, or that I have ever confessed it sufficiently; hence I thought I would include it now to have it off my mind."

The matter will thus be disposed of, unless the priest should judge differently; if so, he will advise you as to what you still have to do. It

is better you get rid of that worry of conscience—and here once more you can be sure that you are not the only one who is so afflicted—than that you go on being unnecessarily troubled, when relief is so ready at hand.

If you are scrupulous, however, do not apply what has just been said to yourself, but comply unwaveringly with the instructions of your confessor. If he has told you never again to worry about or to unearth your past life, you have no further obligations regarding it, no matter what may occur or how things may seem to you, or what manner of sinister feelings regarding it may possess you. You can not go wrong by obeying your God-appointed director.

Sins in Storage

There are Christians imperfectly instructed as regards the sacrament of penance who store away certain things in their minds with a view of revealing them to the priest on their deathbed. Meanwhile they go to confession right along without mentioning a word about them. This is wrong, of course. If there is something you have to confess on your deathbed, you must confess it at once, whenever you go to confession. You may not hold it over to a future confession. If you do not have to confess it now, you will not have to refer to it on your deathbed.

In truth, the deathbed is the worst possible place to make a good general confession. When the body is racked with pain, and the mind is either engrossed with many cares attendant upon the last moments one spends on earth, or is in a delirium most of the time, the occasion is evidently not favorable to a life's confession. When you have a piercing headache or a maddening toothache, for instance, you do not say: "Now I am going to confession." You rather say: "It is impossible for me to make any kind of confession in this condition." You will feel as bad or worse when you are on your deathbed. Prudent Christians, therefore, make whatever deathbed confession they plan to make in the days of health, when they still have themselves in easy possession, and their mind is fresh and well balanced, so they can go about this important work with as much effectiveness as composure.

Every Confession a Deathbed Confession

When St. Vincent de Paul, the hero of Christian charity, was dying, at the age of about eighty-four years, he made a confession which to the priest that heard it seemed to be just ordinary. He called the saintly penitent's attention to the fact that he was dying and said: "Father Vincent, don't you think you had better make a deathbed confession, for this is likely the last confession

you will ever make?" The saint looked up into the priest's eyes with hope and assurance, and replied: "Father, I have been making everyone of my confessions as though it was my last, or my deathbed confession."

This pious and salutary custom is sedulously pursued by all fervent Catholics. They confess each time as though they were to be summoned before the judgment seat of God no sooner they got the absolution from the priest. This manner of confessing does not render them nervous, hysterical and spiritually perturbed; but it makes them be very much in earnest, thoroughly contrite, and fully sincere in judging themselves so they will not be judged by God.

Optional General Confession

Besides the general confession that is necessary in certain instances, there is the general confession of mere devotion. It is entirely optional. Pious people have the custom of making such a general confession at outstanding periods and unusual events of their life: at their first solemn Communion, for example; when they are on the point of entering the convent or seminary; before holy marriage; at missions and retreats; at the end of a year; on certain anniversaries, etc. Some cover their entire life, others only a given space of time, with their general confessions. As a rule, once you have comprised a portion of

your past life in a careful, candid and contrite general confession, it is inadvisable ever to go over that period again in a subsequent general confession. It may awaken the remembrance of confessed and forgiven sins which, individually, are more profitably forgotten forever.

The general confession of devotion, when sensibly and properly made, contains a large and distinct spiritual gain. It may be likened to the practice of a good and earnest business man who periodically audits and balances his books, and takes a close inventory of his stock. He knows just where he stands and how he is faring in his business. Bankruptcy will not easily come upon him unawares, and destitution will hardly take him by surprise.

The periodical general confession of devotion is in a word the deathbed confession of the one who performs it. It keeps him ready to give an account of his stewardship. His spiritual books are always in order. His mind is at rest regarding his chances of salvation. He is taking no risks. He is not groping in the dark. He knows just how he stands with God. Whatever sins may escape him in his ordinary weekly, or fortnightly, or monthly confessions he locates in his examination preparatory to his general confession. It may be said that between the ordinary and general confession there is about the same difference as there is between fishing with a hook and line and fishing with a net.

To specify some of the particular advantages of a general confession we find that it helps to give one a better knowledge of his spiritual, religious and moral life. By bringing one's sins of a long period simultaneously before the mind it begets a deeper and warmer feeling of sorrow for sin, and an intenser resolution to avoid sin in the future. At the same time it points out what sins are to be particularly guarded against, and what predominant passion, being the root of nearly all of the sins committed, is to be especially fought. The revelation of so many sins at one time implies a greater humiliation and a keener mortification. The priest who hears the story is thereby better qualified to guide, warn and encourage the penitent aright, and to give him the particular spiritual help he may be in need of.

The Penitent's Choice

Whenever the general confession is optional, one is at liberty to repeat or to omit whatever sins he likes from his previous confessions. But if his general confession is to be fruitful, its main aim must be the voluntary humiliation of the penitent. The more the confession contains of this, the better and grander will be its results. The penitent will therefore include mainly those sins of the past which involve greater shame and abasement for himself, and expose them altogether bald and unvarnished, albeit delicately

and reverently, just as he knows himself to have been guilty of them.

There are various good methods of making an optional general confession. If you find that writing your sins helps you to confess easier, you are at liberty to resort to it. Ordinarily, especially if you make general confessions quite often and regularly, say at every annual retreat, it is wise not to write your sins, but to depend on your memory for their recital. Writing may beget and foster scrupulosity, which is the bane of general as well as of all other confessions.

A Manner of General Confession

Most pious people, who lead a regular life, examine their conscience daily, and go to confession every week or two, have this manner of making a general confession: They begin by making their last ordinary confession. When they are through with it they say: "Father, I desire to make a review of the past year. My weekly confessions have been on the order of the one I have just made. I want to include these particular sins of the past year, however." Then they proceed to mention the unusual failings and shortcomings, beginning preferably with those that are more abashing and discomfiting. They say all the mortal sins of the year, of course, if they committed any, and also the more deliberate and habitual venial sins. This is a perfect general

confession. It involves little difficulty and some sacrifice; but its reward is immediate and far surpasses the labor and trouble expended upon it. When making a general confession, one may make his ordinary confession apart, or merely include it in his general confession.

People who are scrupulous or inclined to become so should not attempt a general confession of devotion or of any other kind without the consent of their confessor. If he has counselled them against it, and dispensed them from every obligation of making a general confession, they must do as they have been told, if they want to please God and consult the peace of their soul. If they endeavor to make a general confession in the face of his prohibition or dissuasion, it will harm them much more on many counts than it will profit them.

And here it may be added that, however salutary general confessions of devotion may be, there is never an obligation to make them, no matter how much they may be urged, say at the first solemn Communion, at missions, retreats, before entering a convent, before contracting marriage, or even on one's deathbed. One can comply perfectly with whatever these solemn occasions demand by making an ordinary confession of a week or month, as the case may be, without referring in any way to the sins already disposed of in past confessions.

What is optional always remains optional of itself; and no inherent utility it may possess can render what is merely optional obligatory. It is good to remember this, so as not to strain even the value of a devotional general confession beyond the bounds of prudence and common sense for ourselves or others. In all things excess is as reprehensible as it is harmful.

It Is Not So Hard

Sinners who have a long life of sin and sacrilege behind them, and need a general confession to right all the previous unworthy confessions, will naturally follow a different method of general confession than the one outlined above for pious people. Yet, as long as they are truly contrite and definitely done with sin, their general confession need not be overly difficult and trying. It is usually not nearly so hard as they fear it will be. Prayerbooks containing formulas of examination of conscience will be of much help to them. And whatever other assistance they may require the priest in the confessional will gladly and considerately supply.

The Prodigal Son, mentioned by our Lord, was very nervous in rehearsing the confession he wanted to make to his father at his return to his home. But when he actually was face to face with his father, his confession developed into a task

of unsensed sweetness and unprecedented consolation. The Father Who received his confession is the same as the Father Who, in the disguise of the human priest, is waiting for you in the confessional. He will render your return to Him, provided you have the sincere, humble and contrite disposition of the Prodigal Son, just as sweet, consoling and entrancing as his.

A Practical Hint

Finally there may be room here for the practical hint that, if one intends to make a general or any other confession of considerable length and duration, and has the choice of the time for it, he will confer a favor upon the confessor and other penitents if he makes his confession when the priest is not pressed for time in the confessional because of the long line of penitents waiting outside. If he approaches the confessor in a slack and leisurely period, when the penitents are but few and in no hurry, he will be likely to make his own lengthy and probably complicated confession with more ease and unconcern and, as a result, with the acquisition of greater peace of heart and rest of soul.

But if there is no choice of time, the penitent will make an obligatory general confession when he can accede to the sacred tribunal; and however many other penitents may be waiting after him, he will give himself all the time he needs, without

growing nervous or fidgety. He is as much entitled to the privileges of the confessional and the attention of the priest as anyone else. On the other hand, he will not consume more time by his confession than is necessary. A good and worthy general confession, no matter how long a period of life it may cover, need not be a lengthy confession in point of duration. It can be quite brief, yet comprehensive withal; and reasonably quick, although genuinely thorough; at the same time sensibly expeditious and supremely efficacious.

The Greater Love

Here the counsel may be repeated that, after you have made an earnest and conscientious general confession of a certain period of your life—you did what you could—it is seldom wise to go over that period again in another later general confession. In this phase of piety there is ordinarily greater love and higher virtue practiced by a childlike and unwavering trust in God's mercy than by a fear, however wholesome, of His judgments. Before confession our Lord, as it were, bids us to "fear Him that can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt., 10, 28): after confession He charges us, saying: "Be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven thee" (Matt., 9, 2).

CHAPTER XXIII.

Contrition

PART ONE

“Heal me, O Lord, for . . . my soul is troubled exceedingly . . . Every night I will water my couch with my tears” (Ps. 6, 3, 7).

AMONG the Persians there is handed down a sweet and touching myth. One day the Deity sent an angel with the commission to go and find the prettiest and loveliest thing on this earth and bring it to heaven. The angel searched long and wide until he came to a battle-field upon which lay a wounded soldier who was dying slowly and painfully, yet cheerfully for his country. The angel reverently gathered a drop of the blood which was oozing from the soldier's wounds, being convinced it was the most beautiful thing on earth, and carried it to heaven. Here he was told by the Deity that the earth contained something grander than that.

The angel renewed his search. He chanced to meet the solemn public funeral of a great benefactor who had befriended hundreds and thousands of the poor and friendless. Among the attendants at the funeral were crowds of widows,

orphans, and other victims of misery who were shedding tears of the warmest gratitude. The angel respectfully carried one of these tears to heaven, persuaded nothing nicer could be found on earth. Again the Deity refused it, saying that the earth contained something more admirable.

Once more the angel resumed his quest. Then he met a man who had sinned, but who was filled with genuine, deep and burning sorrow for his sins. As his eyes up-turned towards heaven, humbly pleading for pardon, hot tears of penitence streamed down his cheeks. The angel caught one of these tears and brought it to heaven. The Deity accepted it, declaring: "This, indeed, is the most beautiful thing there is on earth." In truth what could be grander than true and perfect contrition, proceeding from the pure love of God?

The Value of Contrition

After the penitent has found and knows the sins he is to reveal in the confessional, he must not proceed to the sacred tribunal before he makes a good act of contrition for his sins, together with a sincere purpose not to sin again. This act of contrition which, if it is genuine, is always coupled with a true purpose of amendment, is far and away the most important and necessary element of the sacrament of penance. Without it there can never be any forgiveness of sins, no

matter how strongly the other elements of the sacrament are represented. But when it is present, the sins are always forgiven, whatever else may be missing.

You may examine your conscience ever so closely, and confess your sins ever so precisely, and receive absolution from whatsoever priest, bishop, cardinal or pope: if you have no true sorrow for your sins, the entire ceremony will not avail you towards pardon, but will merely render your soul crimson with sacrilege in addition to the sins that already taint it. Whereas, whenever you have true sorrow: even though one or more mortal sins elude your scrutiny at the examination of conscience, or are unwittingly forgotten in your recital to the priest: your sins are all forgiven.

Such is the value of sorrow. We can not imagine anyone going to confession with sincere contrition without having all his sins condoned by God. And whenever the sacrament of penance is received or treated sacrilegiously—being invalid every time it is handled sacrilegiously, it really can not be said to be received, since no absolution of sin or any other grace is then imparted—this is due ultimately to the absence of contrition. For if one, for instance, wilfully conceals a mortal sin in the confessional, or is woefully negligent in examining his conscience, or is not willing to

quit sin: in all these and similar cases the lack of true sorrow for sin is responsible for the defective disposition of the penitent.

Automobile Accident

To illustrate the effectiveness of contrition in the elimination of sin let us suppose a man has been seriously injured in an automobile accident. He is in a sad plight corporally and spiritually. He has not gone to confession for four months. He is guilty of having missed Mass on Sundays twice, of having been drunk three times, and of having committed adultery once. The priest is called to administer the sacraments. The sick man is conscious and recognizes the priest and his purpose in being there, but he is in no condition to examine his conscience or to tell his sins. Yet he tenderly, hopefully and lovingly seizes the crucifix the priest places in his hands, he presses it to his heart and kisses it with visible love and contrition for his sins.

On the head of that the priest imparts the absolution to him. All his sins are forgiven. He could not recall them or recite them: but he had true sorrow for them: and this in conjunction with the absolution of the priest, wiped them out completely. In fact, if his contrition was perfect, as shall be explained presently, it took away all his sins even before the priest pronounced the words of

absolution. From which we infer that in a case of necessity contrition can even do without the sacrament of penance: but the sacrament of penance can never dispense with or become actual without true contrition on the part of the penitent.

He Has to Confess

Of course, if the man of our story survives and mends in health, he will have to confess his unconfessed, though forgiven, mortal sins when he goes to confession. The command of Christ to submit every mortal sin committed after baptism to the priests for forgiveness binds even when the sins have already been forgiven through contrition. But if the man dies without regaining the ability of confessing, his sins will not be charged against him: they are gone, as far as their guilt is concerned, as though they had never been; although, even after their forgiveness there may still linger the obligation of undergoing some temporal punishment due to the pardoned sins.

Contrition being so necessary and effective, it lies in the interest of all of us to have a clear conception of it. What, then, is contrition? According to the official catechism of the Council of Trent contrition is a grief or pain of the soul in view of our sins, because by them we have offended God, lost heaven, and deserved hell. This grief is not a mere passive displeasure at or dislike

of sin, but it is a positive act of the will by which we rise up against sin. We hate it. We detest it. We abominate it. We deplore it. We wish we had not done it. We turn our back upon it and are through with it forever: because through sin we have rebelled against and insulted God, Whom we now love above all things; and because through sin we have forfeited heaven, and incurred the penalty of hell.

Attrition

If the primary motive of our sorrow for sin is that of self-interest: if we regret having offended God because we have induced Him to withdraw heaven from us and sentence us to hell: our sorrow is called attrition, or imperfect contrition. Of itself this alone will not destroy sin; but in connection with the sacrament of penance or, relatively, with that of extreme unction, it eliminates sin. Casually, too, or incidentally, it extinguishes mortal sin in connection with holy Communion, according to a probable opinion of learned theologians. Say someone was in the state of mortal sin, but was unconscious of it at the time, and he went to holy Communion after making an act of attrition for all his sins: the reception of holy Communion would put an end to his sin. If it occurred to him later that he was guilty of said mortal sin, he would have to confess it, of course, even though it was forgiven through holy Communion.

If we are primarily sorry for our sins because by them we have offended God, Whom we love for His own sake and in view of His infinite goodness and loveliness, our contrition is perfect and, as has been said, it at once annihilates all our sins. Our love of God may be one of gratitude or of benevolence: we may love God in consequence of His many benefits and immense love towards us; or we may love Him for His ineffable and irresistible sweetness and amiability: either love, and the sorrow for our sins ensuing from it, are sufficient unto perfect contrition.

From Attrition to Contrition

Once a person deplores his sins because by them he has lost heaven and merited hell, and is minded to quit sin forever; in a word, has attrition: it should and can not be hard for this person to rise a degree higher and deprecate his sins because by them he has offended God Whom he now loves above all things, and thereby increase his imperfect to perfect contrition. For the only thing that can keep a normal person who has any apprehension of God's natural loveliness from loving God for His own sake, or in view of His supreme goodness, beauty and desirability, is the attachment to sin. As soon as this is broken or given up entirely nothing ought to hinder the penitent sinner from flying to God in wholehearted and all-absorbing love.

Nor does it interfere with perfect contrition that the motive of self-interest alluded to above is associated, although in a secondary degree, with the motive of the love of God for His own sake. For as we are constituted, it is not natural for us even to love God in so high and pure a manner that we lose sight completely of every reference to our own welfare and happiness in the pursuit of this love. Evidently God wants us to love ourselves in loving Him, and to find our own bliss in rejoicing over His.

Perfect Contrition Is Easy

From what has been said we seem to have a right to infer that, with the assistance of God's grace, an act of perfect contrition is not nearly so difficult for a well-meaning and repentant sinner as it is often believed to be, or made to appear. Before our Lord's advent on this earth this act of perfect contrition was the only means of salvation for everyone, Jew or Gentile, who had committed a mortal sin. And since our Lord's appearance here it has been and is today the solitary means of salvation for all those who, being in the state of mortal sin, had not or have not the grace of receiving the sacrament of penance before death.

Unless we assume, therefore, that this act of perfect contrition, with the help of God's grace, is elicited with an ordinary human effort and

comparative ease, we must accept the dread and sombre deduction that very few of the afore-said people have been, and are, and will be saved. This gloomy inference in no way seems to harmonize with God's favorite declaration that "He will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim., 2, 4). "The Lord is gracious and merciful: patient and plenteous in mercy. The Lord is sweet to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps. 144, 8, 9). We may therefore be convinced that with a good will, yielding to God's grace, no one but can easily and readily make an act of perfect contrition.

The Great Grief

Contrition is not only a pain or grief of the soul but, to be sufficient unto the forgiveness of sins, it must be the greatest and the most poignant grief of our life. In other words, the thought of our sins must pain us more than any other calamity that could befall us: say the loss of our fortune, good name, health, dear relatives or fond friends. Nothing within the sphere of our actual or possible experience must hurt us so much as the consciousness of our having offended God through sin. If our contrition does not measure up to this degree of being the supreme grief of our soul it is inadequate and unavailing towards obtaining pardon for our sins.

Perhaps you are taken aback by and shudder at this assertion; and you are saying to yourself: "It is too hard, if not impossible, to experience such a profound and intense grief over one's sins, that it surpasses every sorrow of our life. For ordinary people this is entirely out of question." I admit that it is hard for some to have such a sorrow for their sins. But pray, tell me, for whom is it hard? It is hard for those worldly-minded Christians, who are completely engrossed in the vain and sinful pleasures of this earth; who have never really known God or learned by their personal experience how sweet and grand it is to love Him and be attached to Him in the most intimate friendship. For them it is hard. It is hard for those sensuous, carnal-minded and voluptuous Christians, who wallow in the mire of their animal indulgences, and who can not rise to anything that is pure, noble, heavenly and divine in conception and desire. For them it is hard.

The Great Misfortune

But, to speak after the manner of St. Augustine, give me a soul that loves God, and knows from its own experience how delightful and sweet it is to cling to God in loyalty and devotion. Let us suppose that this soul in a moment of weakness—everyone may be weak and lapse—committed

a mortal sin: in a word, it divorced itself voluntarily from its Creator; it renounced His love and His friendship; it divested itself of sanctifying grace, which had made it like to God and a partaker of His own divine nature; it forfeited its right to heaven; and it made itself liable to eternal damnation. When this soul comes to again, and realizes the terrible nature and disastrous consequences of its sinful act: will it be hard for it to conceive the grief I mentioned, and in the degree which I designated?

Sack-Cloth and Ashes

When we see King David, after the realization of his sins, in a posture of complete collapse and self-annihilation, lying face-down on the ground, clothed in sack-cloth and covered with ashes, moaning and groaning day and night because of the sins with which he had offended God; when we behold St. Mary Magdalen, no sooner the illumination of grace allowed her to see the heinousness of her sins, hastening to Jesus and throwing herself down at His feet, and weeping so copiously that with her tears she bathed His sacred feet which she dried with her hair; and when we contemplate St. Peter, after our Lord, alluding to the apostle's denial, gave him one glance of rebuking love, going out into the court and weeping bitterly; so bitterly that, as tradition tells us, he could never again hear the cock crow without

shedding such burning and abundant tears of sorrow that they gradually dug furrows into his cheeks: can we imagine that there was anything in the world, actual or possible, that could have grieved those penitent souls so fiercely and consumingly as the thought of their sins against God Whom they loved with their whole heart, and with their whole soul, and with their whole mind, and with their whole strength (Mark, 12, 30)? We have offended the same God as they, and perhaps in a manner similar to theirs: why then should it be so hard for us to have the same kind of contrition, and in the same degree as they?

The Meaning of Feelings

Yet here I must caution against a misconception. This contrition, as was said above, is a matter of the will. Usually the feelings, or our emotional nature will be more or less enlisted by it, too, but this is by no means necessary. One can have the most perfect act of love to God and contrition for sin without experiencing the least excitation in his emotional nature. It may remain entirely dull, inert and apparently dead without discounting in any way the value of the act of perfect contrition. Contrariwise one may have very vivid feelings of apparent contrition when he goes to confession, and yet he may lack true sorrow for his sins. Our feelings are not always,

and they are never altogether, under our control. They depend to a large extent upon factors and conditions which elude the mastery of the will. Sometimes we cry or laugh when we should like to refrain from it; again when we wish we could cry or laugh, we can not do it. The same is true regarding other utterances of our emotions: they come and go quite independently of our will. The sensible feelings of human love offer a well-known daily illustration of this phenomenon. People are overcome with these feelings for a person whom they wish they did not love; on the other hand they can not sense them at all for others whom they wish they could love.

He Sobs, Sighs and Whines

There comes to confession a man, whose nervous system has been shattered by dissipation and debauchery, and whose emotional nature is consequently morbid and strongly inclined to hysteria. He seems intensely sorry for his sins of drunkenness and immorality. In the confessional he suffers emotional convulsions. He sobs, and cries, and whines for sorrow; he trembles all over and shakes the whole confessional with his tremors. The priest, in view of his great sorrow, gives him the absolution. The penitent leaves the confessional, weeps some more as he prays his penance, gets up and leaves the church. Who knows, perhaps the very first steps he takes

will lead him again to the place of sin. He had many feelings, but he exerted no real will-power. His contrition was only on the surface. It was a sham and a bogus contrition.

A Different Type

Another man comes to confession. He is of a different type. He has sinned grievously, too. Now he rues it from his heart. His emotional nature, however, remains unstirred, listless, indifferent and apathetic. He can not shed a tear, or awaken a single feeling of sensible sorrow. But his will is done with sin and fixed in the determination to love God above all things and to serve him faithfully at all costs. He confesses without any visible symptom of overcoming sorrow. He is absolved of his sins. He perseveres and remains loyal to God. He did not have the feelings, but he had the substance, of contrition. And this alone counts.

The True Gage

In religion and piety, therefore, one must learn not to attach undue importance to feelings, but to be guided mainly by faith, grace and common sense. Many pious people go awry in piety and virtue for attributing too great a significance to the presence or absence of certain sweet emotions at the performance of their religious exercises and moral duties. If, for example, they sense

high spiritual exaltation in an emotional way when they pray, go to confession, or receive holy Communion, they are convinced these exercises have a great spiritual value: whereas, if this feeling is missing, they fear lest their prayer may be valueless, and their reception of the sacraments unworthy. This is a big mistake, and may likely lead to bigger ones. The more one accustoms himself to go about his religious and other duties for the mere love of God and his soul, regardless of what emotions start or do not start within him, the better he shows himself to be grounded in true piety and virtue, the more substantial joy he derives from religion, and the more promise he gives of attaining final perseverance.

A Gift of God

Not as though these spiritual delights that encompass our emotional nature and transfuse it with the ecstasy of heaven were not also a gift of God, that deserves to be sincerely appreciated and made much of, and for which we owe God the vigorous gratitude of our hearts. Yet, much as we may prize and warmly as we may welcome them when they come to us unsolicited and unexpected, we must carefully guard against attaching to them a meaning they do not convey, and an importance they do not possess. In our religious and spiritual experiences, too, it is

good to mind the advice of the Bible: "Remember poverty in the time of abundance, and the necessity of poverty in the day of riches" (Ecclus., 18, 25); and to imitate the conduct of St. Paul who says: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content therewith. I know both how to be brought low, and I know how to abound: (everywhere and in all things I am instructed) both to be full, and to be hungry; both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things in Him Who strengtheneth me" (Philipp., 4, 11-13).

Your Appetite Is Normal

To return to our subject of contrition, it will easily and commonly happen, therefore, that you experience immensely more emotional grief when you suffer some severe earthly calamity than you sense at the thought of your sins against God. If your father or mother, or husband or wife, or child, or some other very dear person was suddenly taken away by death, you would grieve over it so that you would neither eat, nor sleep, nor enjoy life in any way for days and weeks. This does not happen to you when you go to confession. If you are not scrupulous, your appetite on confession days is normal; so is your sleep. Is that a sign that your grief over your sins is not the greatest, the supreme pain of your life? Not at all. For, as was exposed above, this pain need

not manifest itself in the feelings, but it is sufficient if it reside in the will.

In other words, you must be so set against sin that, if you had to make a choice between them, you would prefer to endure any other misfortune whatsoever rather than commit sin. It is needless to add that one, while making an act of contrition, does not have to picture to himself the various ills or misfortunes he would rather suffer than sin. As a rule it is quite inadvisable and imprudent to institute any such comparisons, since they have a tendency to create unnecessary disturbance and cause unwarranted doubts in certain timid souls. Just so the mind is agreed that sin is the greatest possible evil, and the will is disposed to shun it at any cost for the love of God, no further reflection is required or opportune, for the act of contrition is already perfect.

A Hundred Per Cent Perfect

If you can say with the great penitent St. Paul, not only with your lips, but in your heart: "Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation? or distress? or famine? or nakedness? or danger? or persecution? or the sword? . . . But in all these things we overcome because of Him That hath loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present,

nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom., 8, 35-39): your contrition is perfect, and all your sins, without a single exception, have completely and forever disappeared in the sight of God, regardless of what emotions you may or may not be experiencing the while

CHAPTER XXIV.

Contrition

PART TWO

“Thou art not delighted in our being lost: after tears and weeping Thou pourest in joyfulness”
(Tob., 3, 22).

THE act of perfect contrition being so effective and so valuable in reference to the forgiveness of sins, the question arises: How long does it take to make an act of perfect contrition?

Aside from the grace of God, which is the chief factor in this supernatural process, and which is sufficiently and abundantly bestowed upon all those who are willing to cooperate with it, the answer to the above question depends on the person who is making the act of contrition. Many, I will say most, of the readers of this book are no doubt capable of making an act of perfect contrition in an instant and in the twinkling of an eye; and that without any special effort whatever. What qualifies them to make so grand and consequential an act with so much ease and expeditiousness? They are experts at it. What has made them experts at it? A long and continual practice.

They Like It

These persons elicit the acts of perfect love to God and sorrow for their sins oftener than anything else they do in life. They start as soon as they awake each morning. Their first conscious occupation, while they tenderly, gratefully and lovingly kiss the crucifix they hold in their hands, is the raising of the heart to God in unbounded attachment, and in inexpressible grief for having offended Him. They renew this act ever so often during the day. Somehow everything reminds them of God, and has their mind to turn to Him in sweetest union, and in the most tearful regret for having turned away from Him through sin.

The sight of the crucifix, of pictures of our Lord and other emblems of our faith; the sound of the church bells; the view of the church, the altar, the tabernacle or the holy rail; their successes and their failures; their good fortunes and their reverses; good reports and evil reports: everything seems to conspire to draw them nearer to God and to have them cling to Him in unswerving loyalty and bitter remorse for their past unfaithfulness. Their last waking thought at night, as they once more imprint an ardent kiss upon their dear crucifix, and their conscious mental activities during the night, whenever they awake, are sighs of burning love to the God of their salvation, and a pleading prayer to Him to forgive them all their sins.

It's Their Second Nature

In consequence of this long and intense practice it is not to be marveled at that these acts of perfect love and contrition have become a veritable second nature to them, so that they elicit them instinctively and spontaneously, not only without any exertion or labor, but with spiritual transport and ecstasy. God is not hard to love for His own sake. The soul that knows Him ever so meagerly can not help loving Him and, after the example of St. Paul, considering everything else, especially sinful pleasures and delights, as refuse in comparison to Him. This disposition of itself bespeaks perfect love and contrition.

Why, then, should it take long, or be hard, for a soul that is or wants to be through with sin to conceive these sentiments and elicit these acts? It did not take Mary Magdalen long, nor St. Peter, nor the thief on the cross. Human nature has not changed since then; neither has the grace of God decreased; nor has the loveliness of God been dimmed; neither has the heinousness of sin grown less. Why, then, should the process of perfect contrition require more time today than it did then?

A Mistaken Idea

The only reason a number of truly pious and God-loving souls believe it takes them long to

make an act of perfect contrition is because they unwisely let themselves be guided by the mistaken idea, that they have to "feel" contrite before they can be satisfied that they are contrite. In the light of what has been said in the previous chapter in regard to "feeling" in religious matters, their attitude is more to be deplored and pitied than admired and imitated. Nowhere are we told that we have to feel contrition; all that is enjoined upon us is that we are to have it. The difference is essential, and it is highly conducive to our peace of mind and comfort of heart in our exercises of piety always to pay proper attention to and be duly directed by it.

There are cases, of course, when an act of perfect contrition requires considerable time and no little labor on the part of the prospective penitent. When a man is returning to God and virtue from a long life of sin and vice, God, by a miracle of mercy, can in a second melt his heart to the utmost penitence, as He did in the case of the repentant thief. But such a miracle is rare. Usually God employs the ordinary process of grace which functions more slowly and makes gradual demands on its subject.

A Change of Heart

For the aforesaid sinner, then, contrition means a complete change of heart. He must now hate

what he loved: sin, vice, self-indulgence, impurity, intemperance, unforgiveness, sloth and whatever evil passions or practices he has been addicted to. And he must love what he hated: virtue, piety, self-restraint, purity, temperance, forgiveness of injuries, avoidance of the occasions of sin and all those things that will stabilize him in the fear of God and the quest of salvation.

To effect this transformation of heart within himself the sinner must pray fervently, and meditate assiduously on the great truths of our faith: salvation, death, judgment, heaven, hell, the infinite love of God, His tremendous justice, the death of Jesus on the Cross, the heinousness of sin and similar eternal and impressive truths. This procedure will by and by turn his heart away from evil and fix it on God, and beget in him those sentiments which denote perfect contrition.

If this method appears wearisome, it is not so in reality, for God not only starts it, but He also accompanies it at every stage, and perfects it with His grace that renders the entire action sweet, consoling and quickening. He fulfills the promise He makes through the prophet, saying: "I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in the midst of

you: and I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them" (Ezech., 36, 26, 27).

They Are Not Sure

To a number of Christians it is a source of repeated worry that they are not sure whether their contrition is genuine or not. Many a one says: "What renders confession hard and distasteful to me is not the obligation of confessing my sins. I do not mind this at all. If I have had the effrontery to offend God by sin, I am glad to atone for it by deserved self-humiliation. I rather enjoy telling against myself the sins I have had the audacity to do against God. But what makes me anxious and troubled of mind is the uncertainty about the nature of my contrition. I can never feel satisfied that I am truly contrite, no matter how much I labor and force myself to be so. If I only had some sign by which I could tell that my contrition is genuine, I should thoroughly love to go to confession."

To "Feel" Contrite

Here we have another case of one indiscreetly and ill-advisedly trying to "feel" contrite, and making morbid and senseless efforts to create this feeling, which often results from conditions over

which the mind and will have little or no control. Another mistake he makes is to long for absolute certainty in a matter in which God designs we should ordinarily do without it. No one is entirely sure that his contrition is genuine, unless God gives him a revelation to that effect, which He seldom does. The Church has practically declared as much.

God, as a rule, prefers us not to be sure of our contrition, so that we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philipp., 2, 12). Even St. Paul himself seemed not to be sure of his contrition, since he said: "I am not conscious to myself of anything, yet am I not hereby justified; but He That judgeth me, is the Lord" (1 Cor., 4, 4). Had he been sure that he possessed perfect contrition, he would have been sure that he was justified, for in a penitent sinner these two states are correlative, one implying the other.

If, therefore, practically no one is completely sure of the genuineness of his contrition, and God has planned that we should not have absolute certainty regarding it, why do you yearn to be sure and strive after the impossible? All your forced and artificial attempts to produce this feeling of certainty within you will be in vain. They will merely disgust you with your idle striving, and cast ridicule upon the sacrament of penance in the eyes of others.

God Is Easy to Love

If God is so hard to love, and sin is so difficult to hate, as the manner of some pious but misguided penitents in preparing themselves for the reception of the sacrament of penance would make us believe, then our "faith is vain" (1 Cor., 15, 17), and "we are of all men most miserable" (ib., 19), instead of being the happiest of creatures, because God "hath translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in Whom we have redemption through His blood, the remission of sins" (Col., 1, 13, 14).

May we, then, have no assurance whatever that our contrition is good? and is there no sign at all giving us such assurance? Theologians tell us we may and should have a moral certainty in a broad sense; in other words a strong probability, that our contrition is sincere. And there is only one really evident and conclusive sign to furnish us this prepossession in favor of our contrition. This is the change of our conduct for the better after our confession, or the practical beneficial results of our contrition. Tears are good in their way; so are sobs of grief over sin; an humble and candid manner in the confessional also speaks in our behalf: but the only convincing symptom of genuine contrition is if, according to our Lord's recipe, it brings forth "fruit worthy of penance" (Matt., 3, 8); if it improves our

morals; eliminates our faults; has us to satisfy for, and repair the damages inflicted by, our sins; increases our piety; and intensifies our love of God and our neighbor.

They Argued

Of this we find a graphic illustration in the incident of the cure of the man born blind, as it is reported by St. John. After Jesus had given this poor man the gift of vision, "the neighbors. . . and they who had seen him before that he was a beggar said: Is not this he that sat and begged? Some said: This is he. But others said: No, but he is like him. But he said: I am he" (John, 9, 8, 9). Such in a similar way should be the impression you make upon others after Jesus has cured you of your spiritual blindness and other diseases of the soul in the confessional. The people you live and come in contact with must notice a change in you and marvel at it in a way.

"Is this the same man?" they will be saying within or among themselves, for example. "Formerly he was so quick-tempered, irascible and inconsiderate of the feelings of others: and now he is so mild, so gentle, and so regardful of others' comfort and well-being." Or they may say: "Is this the same woman? She used to have such a loose and wild tongue, sparing no reputation, and disrupting sweet and friendly relations right and

left by her unrestrained belittling, defamatory, and tale-bearing activities: and now she is so moderate in her speech, so charitable in her utterances, and so thoughtful of the good name and happiness of others in everything she says."

One might be endless in giving other instances of these possible surprises after confession, since there is no counting the divers foibles and vices of men which the confessional aims to correct. Every reader will or, at least, ought to know what manner of surprise he is expected to give when he leaves the confessional to those who converse, work or live with him. Some change for the better must be noticeable in your conduct if your contrition has been more than an idle fancy, a vapid profession, or a passing emotion. Allow me to describe some features of your conduct as it is when you are under the influence of genuine contrition.

Reliable Marks of Contrition

After confession you steer clear of the sins you professed to be sorry for. In order to succeed in this you are careful to avoid the occasions of sin: the persons, places, shows, dances and other amusements, the conversations, pictures and literature which have been more or less persistently the occasions of your falls. You are assiduous in the use of the means of grace and perseverance: such as daily prayer and daily examination of

conscience; the frequentation of the sacraments; the continual thought of God's presence; good reading; the association with virtuous persons, and a liberal attitude towards the poor and the Church. Moreover, you are conscientious and quick in repairing the injuries or harm done by your sins: you restore the ill-gotten goods; you return the money you stole or were instrumental in stealing; you pay your honest debts; you make good the damages you have caused another's property or good name; you rebuild the relations of friendship and good-will which you destroyed; you undo the scandals you have given; and you demonstrate by your conduct that you have truly forgiven all your enemies. You thereby give the best possible evidence to yourself and others that your contrition contained substance and value in the sight of God, and you have no reason in the world to feel at all uneasy about it.

Counterfeit Contrition

But if, on the contrary, soon after confession you again commit the same grievous sins which you professed to be sorry for; with the same non-chalance and without a semblance of resistance; with the same frequency and regularity; you are at no pains whatever to avoid the occasions of sin, or to use the means of grace and perseverance; you make no effort to repair the injury done by your sins and to satisfy the demands of justice

and charity: then you have every ground to fear that your contrition was counterfeit, and was either wilfully insincere or gross self-deception, since it had no effect whatever on your subsequent life.

It may not have been so glaringly unreal as was that of the man in the following story, but it was just as unavailing and fruitless. This man confessed to the priest that he had been stealing hay from one of his neighbors. When the priest inquired how much hay he had stolen, the man replied naively and bluntly: "Father, if I have a good day tomorrow, I believe I shall be able to acquire the entire stack." Ridiculously inconsistent as this sounds, there are not a few penitents, who sin habitually in marriage, in courtship, or alone, against the holy virtue; or in business against justice; or otherwise: whose contrition is just as hollow and hypocritical.

Every confessor is aware that even the best and most sincere penitent, after returning from a long life of sin, may relapse into sin again after the most perfect act of contrition in connection with his confession. But if he sins again, it will seldom be very soon after confession; and it will never be without some struggle and initial resistance. Moreover his falls will be less frequent and not so heavy as they were before; and by and by he will stabilize himself in virtue and grace in such a way that he will avoid every mortal sin.

St. Philip Cures Him

In the life of St. Philip Neri we read that there came to confession to him a young man who seemed to be a hopeless victim of the solitary sin. He had lost all will-power and confidence in himself. He came to Philip in utter despair.

The man of God, however, buoyed him up and bade him put his trust in the Lord, and resolve to get away from the humiliating thralldom of sin at any cost. The young man expressed his willingness to do so, but could not muster the courage to make himself believe he could succeed.

Philip helped him elicit his act of contrition and good resolution. The young man was timid and diffident about these acts. He said he really hated sin then and there, while he was getting ready for confession, but somehow he felt he would fall into the loathsome sin again when the temptation would be upon him. Philip absolved him and had him to promise he would return to confession no sooner he sinned again.

For thirteen consecutive days the young man had to come and ruefully admit that he had relapsed into his fleshly weakness. Philip absolved him each day, animating and heartening him to lose neither his trust in God nor his confidence in himself. After the thirteenth absolution the young man was strong and never fell back into his besetting sin again. The grace of God, administered through the agency of St. Philip, finally

confirmed the will of the young man unto victory and perseverance.

Do Not Lose Heart

From this story many a poor and seemingly helpless sinner must derive substantial and soothing solace and encouragement. Because of his many relapses, due in most cases to the weakness of the flesh, he has lost all reliance on his acts of contrition and his purpose of amendment: and yet in the light of the aforesaid incident he has reasons to assume that, weak as he may be in the time of temptation, he still may be sincerely and resolutely set against sin when the temptation is remote. Consequently his contrition and good resolution to avoid sin, preparatory to confession, may be genuine and even perfect. But if they are, they will exert their strength unto victory over whatsoever sin sooner or later, as in the story just related. Occasional relapses should not discourage anyone: but continuous and incessant relapses into the same mortal sin for months and years, without noticeable resistance, are an obvious betrayal of the want of genuine sorrow for sin, and of the absence of any real will of amendment.

As Man Makes, So He Unmakes His Habits

It is true that evil habits of long standing are not easily and readily rooted out. It is equally

true, that a will that has been very weak for a long time does not wax strong and unbending at once. Naturally and psychologically these are truisms. But in the matter of conversion and penitence we must not overlook the supernatural factor, which plays a large part. The words of our Lord must weigh heavily in the balance when the appraisal is made of what the penitent sinner can or can not do. Jesus says: "The things that are impossible with men, are possible with God" (Luke, 18, 27).

Man is the creature of his habits, they say. Yes; but he is also the creator of them. And in the same manner as he created certain evil habits by frequent repetition, he can uncreate or destroy them by frequent contrary acts for which the grace of God will lend him what support he needs.

In his "Confessions of An Opium Eater" De Quincey relates how he cured himself of a seemingly hopeless addiction to this tyrannical drug by reducing the dose from day to day until the craving for it was entirely vanquished. This example shows how much will-power can achieve in the natural order. How much more will it not be able to do, when bolstered up and reinforced by supernatural strength.

Control Your Thought Life

The person who wants to conquer a deep-rooted habit must begin by controlling his

thoughts. Every human action begins in the mind. Whoever, then, exercises a strict surveillance over his thoughts, and unyieldingly refuses admittance, let alone endorsement, to those thoughts that have a trend towards his ruling weakness, will not be long in overcoming his vicious propensities, and regaining the sweet liberty of the children of God.

We can not hinder evil thoughts from attacking us, and making a strong and insistent bid for entrance and lodgment in our mind. But we can refuse them admission and keep them at bay resolutely and doggedly. If we do this, our victory is assured. Alluding to these unwholesome and unwelcome thoughts St. Augustine used to say: "I can not hinder the birds from flying over my head, but I can keep them from making a nest in my hair."

CHAPTER XXV.

Contrition

PART THREE

"Amen I say to you, that you shall lament and weep . . . and you shall be made sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (John, 16, 20).

NOT a few sham penitents are similar to the little boy who had heard the priest say in the catechism class that we can never do a sin unless we really want to do it. It was Friday. Someone offered the boy a tempting chicken sandwich. He was hungry, and the morsel looked enticing. Remembering that it was Friday, however, he was in a predicament. He did not want to sin; and yet he wanted to eat the sandwich. Suddenly he hit on what he thought was a happy solution. Recalling that he could not commit a sin without wanting to commit it, he said to himself: "I do not want the sin; I only want the chicken." And all the while he was consuming the sandwich he kept on repeating to himself: "No sin; just chicken." He felt he had handled the situation cleverly.

Many penitents, I say, imitate this ignorant boy. They try to make themselves believe, when

they go to confession, that they hate sin and want to quit it. At the same time they do not prevail upon themselves to hate and quit those things or practices which actually constitute sin. For if they really turned against them with all their heart, and mind, and will, and strength, they would soon discontinue them entirely. Nothing is stronger than our will when it effectively and finally decides to want something in reality.

Strong-Willed

We can all be very stubborn or, as we like to call it, strong-willed in certain matters. If we would only employ this valuable quality against repeating those acts that are sins, they would never again form a shadow in our life. If we but responded faithfully to the grace of God, no matter what our past life or present spiritual condition might be, we could command our passions to such an extent that we could banish sin and invite virtue after the manner of the centurion who said to our Lord: "I also am a man subject to authority, having under me soldiers; and I say to this, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it" (Matt., 8, 9). Such is, or ought to be, the will-power in everyone of us.

He Played Safe

A colored minister had officiated at the wedding of two young people of his race. When the ceremony was over, the groom asked the minister what consideration he owed him for his part in it. The minister graciously and blandly gazed at the bride and then at the groom, and said: "Whatever you think she is worth to you." "Oh," rejoined the groom; "am I to pay what she is worth to me? Then it will be fairer if we wait a year or two so I can find out what she is worth; then I will pay you accordingly." The minister did not accede to this honest-looking bargain, but retorted quickly and diplomatically: "You had better make it five dollars." He would take no chances. Had he waited, however, he might have got five thousand dollars; or again, he might not have got a cent.

For us the moral of this story lies in the suggestion of evaluating the marriage happiness not by present display or passing exaltation of mind, but by the later developments and the lasting results. Applied to confession this standard of measurement is the only reliable one in the end. It is not a question, after all, of how many tears you shed as you prepare for confession or while making it; nor is it a question of how elevated your spirits are and how animated your emotions while you are receiving and after you have received the absolution: but it is a

question of what fruits the confession produces in your life and what results it has upon your behavior.

He Was Not the Same

St. Ambrose tells the story of a young man who was maintaining illicit relations with a girl. The youth had to leave the city in which the two of them lived, and he travelled abroad for a long space of time. In the meanwhile he converted thoroughly from his evil ways, and was determined never again to resume them. When he returned to his native city the girl expected him to renew the vicious relations of old. She soon noticed that he was in no mood to do anything of the kind. She said to him plaintively: "Do you not know me anymore? I have not changed. I am the same I have always been. Why do you act in so strange a manner?"

"You may be the same," the young man replied, "but I am no longer the same, and never again will be the same as when you knew me before my departure from you. As far as committing sin goes, you and I are through forever." Would that all penitents would speak thus, either directly or indirectly, namely by their manner, to the former accomplices of their sins after confession. How many a marriage, for instance, would be kept holy; and how many a courtship would revert to the canons of Christian decency and sanctity!

The Friar Hesitated

This story reminds one of the episode in the life of St. Margaret of Cortona. After leading a life of public scandal with a young man for nine years, she suddenly found him lying dead in his blood in a grove, in which he had been killed by a jealous rival. This blood-curdling spectacle turned her peremptorily and lastingly from sin, and inspired her with a passionate desire for penitence and mortification. When she approached the superior of the Franciscan friary in Cortona in order to be received in the Order of Penance, or the Third Order of St. Francis, the friar halted and hesitated, and then ended by telling her that she, a public sinner, was not a fit candidate for the Order.

Margaret replied humbly but decidedly: "Father, you do not know me. You knew Margaret, the sinner. I am not Margaret, the sinner. I am Margaret, the penitent." After persuading himself of the sincerity of her penance, he admitted her in the Order, of which she soon became one of the greatest and brightest ornaments. If after confession everyone would say with the same finality, expressly or virtually, to those who were his associates in sin, or whom he disedified through sin: "You do not know me. I am no longer the sinner you knew. I am a true and loyal penitent of the Lord," the effects of themselves would guarantee the worthy reception of the sacrament.

Just a Remark

Here there may be room for a remark in answer to an objection or misgiving that may have arisen in the minds of the readers of this book, to wit: Why do religious books, when there is a call for illustrations of what they are inculcating, seem to show a preference for cases involving immorality of some kind, as in the two instances in the preceding paragraphs, when so many other less embarrassing analogies would be available? Why do preachers, notably missionaries, follow the same custom? Does not St. Paul say: "Fornication, and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not so much as be named among you, as becometh saints; or obscenity, or foolish talking, or scurrility, which is to no purpose?" (Ephes., 5, 3, 4.)

This same question perplexes the minds of seminarists when they are studying moral theology. They wonder why St. Alphonsus, for instance, the great authority on Christian ethics, so often uses sins of impurity in elucidating the principles of Christian conduct. When they become priests, however, and acquire experience in the sacred ministry, they readily become aware that by far the majority of mortal sins are done against the holy virtue and that, consequently, no feature of Christian life needs to be more forcibly emphasized and more clearly explained than the virtue of chastity.

Self-Deception

While this can be done in a positive manner, without drawing on sins of unchastity for illustrative material, still, unless the breaches and violations of purity, in the various relations of life, are referred to and properly branded, they who are guilty of them like to overlook their malice, and persuade themselves that they are either only venial sins or no sins at all. To advise them wholesomely and unmistakably of the real truth of the matter, religious books and sermons rather frequently contain references to lapses against morality. As soon as our Catholic people quit perpetrating these vile sins, the spiritual writers and the Christian preachers will gladly observe complete silence regarding them. They are a very distasteful and nauseating subject at the best, and no one attacks it of his own choice, or handles it preferentially for its own sake.

St. Paul warns against the mention of all uncleanness in a frivolous, irreverent, scurrilous or otherwise sinful manner. This is evident from his very example. Quite often, and with peculiar directness and unescapable clearness he makes mention of various immoralities he insists the Christians must avoid. Had he not pointed out these foul sins so plainly and even bluntly, his instructions would have availed neither unto the correction of the offenders, not the protection of

the innocent ones who might have been tempted to those sins. But it is time we return to our subject.

Ready to Quit

There was both pith and terseness in the answer the little boy gave the priest who asked him, discussing contrition, what it meant to be sorry. The boy replied: "Father, to be sorry means you are ready to quit." Inversely, as long as one is not ready to quit his sins, and evil habits, and dangerous occasions, whatever other appearances of sorrow he may evince: he is not truly sorry.

What has been said about contrition refers primarily to sorrow for mortal sin, and only in a qualified manner to sorrow for venial sin. While in both cases the sins are detested for the love of God, there is this difference between the two kinds of sins in this connection that, while one can never be truly sorry for one mortal sin without at the same time being sorry for all his mortal sins, it is quite possible that one is sincerely sorry for one venial sin without being sorry for all his venial sins. Inferentially, whenever one mortal sin is forgiven because of contrition, associated actually or virtually with the sacrament of holy penance, all the mortal sins are always forgiven; in a word, either all are forgiven

or none at all. Yet one or several venial sins, for which one is sorry, may be forgiven, while one or more others, of which one does not repent, remain unforgiven.

Either Friend or Enemy

The reason of the difference is evident. Through one mortal sin the soul becomes an enemy of God; hence the soul can not be reconciled with God on one or more counts, while remaining estranged from Him on others, or one other. Either it must become altogether a friend of God through the extinction of all mortal sins, or it remains completely an enemy of God through the retention of all mortal sins. Nor are any venial sins forgiven the soul as long as it is afflicted with mortal sin, for the same reason. To one who consciously remains His enemy God does not remit a single sin, as this remission is a sign of friendship and benevolence which God does not and can not show to one who wilfully renounces and stubbornly withstands these relations with God.

A Slight Detour

Venial sin, however, does not render the soul an enemy of God, but merely denotes a slight flaw or unessential foible in the love and friendship for God which the soul is resolved to maintain at any cost. It is therefore understandable how a

person may for a particular reason be sorry for one venial sin and receive pardon for it while the others may remain unwept and unrue'd and, as a result, unforgiven. Still pious Christians, who earnestly strive after perfection, do not make any distinction between venial sins either, but with all their heart they deplore and grieve over all their sins without exception, because by them they have offended God Whom they love above all things, and thereby they receive pardon for all their venial as well as mortal sins. Without express or implied contrition regarding it no sin whatever is pardoned by God.

The Same Sins Forever

What about the contrition of those pious Christians who have the custom of confessing every week, but who practically have the same venial faults to confess week after week, with hardly any observable change year in and year out? All depends on the nature of the faults they have to confess. If they are deliberate venial sins, such as wilful lies, or the irreverent use of God's holy Name, or distinct and positive breaches of charity in thought, word or deed, or similar failings; and these are repeated regularly without any sign of diminution or emendation: the situation speaks in disfavor of the one who is guilty of them, branding him as one who is not earnestly striving after higher and better things.

His contrition regarding these faults, if he elicits any—and he should not confess venial sins for which he is not sorry, since it does not avail him unto pardon—is obviously dubious, if not apparently insincere. And if he only confesses venial sins, for none of which he is sorry, he commits a mortal sin for his abuse of the sacrament of penance, the force of which he wilfully nullifies by his entire lack of contrition for the sins which he submits to the sacred tribunal. The case is different, and sacrilege is forestalled, when in addition to his venial sins he includes in his confession an already forgiven mortal sin from his former life, for which he has true contrition.

A Commendable Custom

For this reason, particularly, namely to be sure they are confessing a sin for which they have true sorrow, pious penitents make it a habit to include in each confession a sin, or a category of sins of their former life, over which they grieve in an unmistakable manner. They thus give the priest the required assurance that he can give them absolution, and they are sufficiently certain that they receive it. This inclusion is briefly made, for example, in this manner: Immediately after your recital of sin you add: “In my former life I have missed Mass on Sundays and holy-days;” or, “I sinned against holy purity;” or, “against my parents,” etc.

But if the venial sins that form the weekly recital of a virtuous soul are due more to an inherent weakness, native temperament, or a sudden excitation than to carelessness, indifference or self-indulgence; and if they consequently are not fully deliberate and done with premeditation: such as distractions in prayer; thoughts of vanity and self-complacency; slight and passing feelings of envy or jealousy; of suspicion or rash judgment; of dislike or aversion for others; slips against authority, charity, or truthfulness in conversation; little but unwarranted starts of anger or indignation, and similar human foibles: their repetition, provided no other more serious sins are added to them, is not at all a prejudice against a desire for perfection and holiness in the subject of it, but rather an indication of the contrary, proving that the penitent has about reached his relative height of virtue and sinlessness and is maintaining it faithfully, without diminution or jeopardy, week after week.

“The Same As Last Week?”

It is only a story, of course, without any foundation in fact. A priest who was acting as confessor in a convent of numerous nuns was known to dispose of his pious penitents in very short order. They seemed merely to go in and out of the confessional without much interval. One of the nuns described the brevity of his method, saying:

“Father asks the Sister penitent as soon as she enters the confessional: ‘Sister, have you about the same sins as last week?’ When the penitent answers: ‘Yes, Father,’ the priest rejoins: ‘Say the same penance as last week.’ Then he gives the absolution.” What the story aims to stress is true, viz., pious and saintly people usually have the same little tale of the same little foibles and shortcomings week after week.

Some sins we shall continue to be guilty of as long as we remain in the flesh. Day for day our Lord bids us pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” And St. John warns us that, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John, 1, 8). It is quite natural, therefore, that if virtuous and God-loving people sin at all, they will sin, first of all, very little; and second, their sins will be more or less the same, since their temperament, environment, occupations, temptations and personal weaknesses, of which their sins are ordinarily a result or a reflection, are the same day in and day out, week after week.

Striving After Perfection

Spiritual writers tell us that we can diagnose our striving after perfection by the manner in which we behave towards deliberate venial sins. If we declare war on them ruthlessly, and eschew

them conscientiously, we are advancing towards perfection. If we dally with them and give them quarter freely and unconcernedly, our strife after perfection is lame and halting. This does not apply, however, to the more or less semi-deliberate venial sins of which mention was made above. Much as we may fight against them and try to avoid them altogether, they will cling to us in some form and degree until we die.

It was the high privilege of our Blessed Mother and, possibly, of St. Joseph and St. John the Baptist, to be entirely free from venial sins: but to us common mortals this distinction is not accorded. We are not only to thank God in the humility of our hearts for having kept us from certain sins; but we have to plead with Him, too, to forgive us the sins we have contracted in our human infirmity. God allows these little foibles and shortcomings to afflict His very saints, in order to keep them in becoming humility and self-depreciation and, strange to say, to promote them in sanctity.

A Consoling Truth

St. Augustine vouches for this when he tells us that we are likely to advance more in perfection by humbly and contritely deploring the sins we have done than by rejoicing, perhaps not without vainglory and self-complacency, over the sins we have not done. There is solid comfort

in this reflection for many a true friend of God who is inclined to grow discouraged that his doleful litany of sins, against his best intentions, contains the same sad admissions of weakness in each recurring confession.

In dwelling on contrition we took it for granted that, as we mentioned at the beginning of the treatise on it, the sincere purpose of amendment is always contained in genuine contrition. Hence if one would happen to forget to elicit expressly the resolution of betterment, the sacrament would still be worthily received, provided he was truly sorry for his sins because by them he offended God. Yet ordinarily it is best and safest, before confessing one's sins, to make a formal purpose of amendment in connection with the act of contrition.

The Purpose of Amendment

It is entirely sufficient to make this purpose in a general way, so it is meant as it is made; for instance if one says: "For the love of God I will never sin again;" even as contrition can be perfect if the penitent merely says, and means it: "For the love of God I am sorry for all my sins." He need not specify any sins in particular; but usually it will profit him if he especially directs his sorrow against certain outstanding and dominant sins. In the same manner it is conducive to greater progress in virtue if the penitent, be-

sides making a general purpose of amendment covering all his sins, formulates certain definite resolutions regarding his main and ruling fault, which is at the root of all or most all his faults; if he says, for example: "I will never sin again. And I will especially avoid the sin of anger; and in order to avoid it I am going to use this and that precaution," etc.

Be a Specialist

The more specific the repentant sinner has these resolutions to be regarding the avoidance of occasions of that particular sin, and the employment of the means of perseverance, the better are his prospects that he will gradually conquer this root of sins altogether. Many penitents have found it to be a substantial help in keeping their resolutions if, when making them, they impose upon themselves, not by vow but merely as a matter of personal honor, certain penances and mortifications in the way of prayer, fasting or almsgiving, for every breach of their resolutions. This work of atonement whets their attention and keeps it keen and close; while at the same time it procures for them stronger and more effective graces from God.

It may be superfluous to add, that one may invert the order outlined in this treatise, and make his act of contrition and purpose of amendment before he examines his conscience, provided those

acts, by their universal and supernatural motive, cover all his sins. Just so these acts are made before the priest imparts the absolution, there is no reason to worry. Usually, however, the aforesaid method is followed by the majority of penitents who, even though they began their preparation for confession by an act of contrition and the purpose of amendment, still renew these acts immediately after their examination of conscience, just before they enter the confessional.

Our One Model

Both the grandest model of, and the most powerful inspiration to, true contrition is Jesus Christ our Savior in His bitter passion and death, beginning with His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and ending on the Cross of Calvary. No sooner He voluntarily became the victim of our sins and our guilt in the Garden of Olives, "He began to grow sorrowful and to be sad. Then He saith . . . : My soul is sorrowful even unto death And going a little further, He fell upon His face, praying" (Matt., 26, 37-39).

Jesus alone, of all beings who have ever been upon this earth, had the proper conception and the adequate evaluation of sin. When He saw Himself burdened, not with sins of His own, but with our sins, over against the majesty, sanctity and justice of His heavenly Father, He collapsed completely from sheer fear and dread, which

were so intense that "His sweat became as drops of blood, trickling down upon the ground" (Luke, 22, 44).

The Comforting Angel

If Jesus, the innocent and spotless one, had reasons for so deep and overwhelming a sorrow for sins not His own, in order to propitiate the anger of His Father, we have as much and more reason to have the same sorrow for our own personal sins to appease the wrath of an incensed and exasperated God. And even as in the midst of His infinite sorrow there came to Jesus an angel of heaven strengthening Him, so, too, in all the bitterness of our grief for our offenses against God there will be an element of heavenly sweetness and consolation that far outstrips the most lauded and sought for thrills of earthly joy or carnal pleasure.

Another mighty stimulant to true and encompassing contrition is given us by our Lord's agonizing and heart-rending cry on the Cross: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Mark, 15, 34.) To be forsaken by God is the worst possible evil that can befall a soul, and plunges it into utter dereliction and unqualified abandonment. When the penitent realizes that through his mortal sins he has forced God, as it were, to forsake him, he can not but be overcome with sorrow and crushed with grief

because of these sins. Again, the sinner, knowing that, as St. Paul says, he crucified again to himself the Son of God, and made Him a mockery (Hebr., 6, 6), seems to hear our dying Savior calling him by name and saying: "Why hast thou forsaken Me?" And when he reflects Whom he forsook by sin, and in what manner, he can not but conceive the most lively hatred for his sins and the warmest desire to avoid them forevermore.

Upon a Tree

The attributes of God, such as His majesty, sanctity, justice, and love, are of themselves invisible, and therefore they do not easily exert the most potent influence upon the mind and heart of the sinner. But in Jesus hanging on the Cross, and dying for us, the repentant sinner sees these and all the other attributes of God taking bodily shape, as it were, in order to impress him irresistibly unto ardent sorrow, and an unflinching purpose of amendment, and final perseverance. No sinner, still possessing a spark of faith, can look with dry eyes and a cold heart upon Jesus Crucified, "Who His own self bore our sins in His body upon a tree: that we, being dead to sins, should live to justice: by Whose stripes you were healed. For you were as sheep going astray; but you are now converted to the shepherd and bishop of your souls" (1 Peter, 2, 24, 25).

CHAPTER XXVI.

On the Way to the Confessional

“Enter ye in at the narrow gate How narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it” (Matt., 7, 13, 14).

THE German poet and novelist, Clement Brentano, had for some years been sowing his wild oats in a lively manner and given up the practice of the Catholic faith. He had made the acquaintance of the young and promising poetess, Louise Hensel, a winsome and sympathetic personality. She was a Protestant at the time, but later on became an ardent adherent of Catholicism.

In a confidential conversation with the charming young lady, who admired him for the brilliant gifts of his mind, Brentano began to tell her the vagaries of his life, the intimate secrets of his conduct, and the misery of his heart in his reckless pursuit of pleasure. Of a sudden she turned to him and said: “Why do you tell me, a young girl, these things? You are a Catholic. You have confession in your Church. Why, then, do you not confess your life to the priest and get help, enlightenment and comfort from him?”

This well-timed rebuke brought the wayward son of the Church to his senses. He was stunned by the thought that a young non-Catholic girl had to remind him of his duty as well as of his privilege. He was overcome and wept like a child. Then he used the next opportunity to go to confession. He made his peace with God and recovered the happiness of his soul.

Weary of Life

Many a Catholic is miserable at heart and weary of life. God gives the reason of this misery and weariness when He says: "My people have done two evils. They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and have digged to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer., 2, 13). Instead of seeking the remedy for his loneliness and heartache in purposeless confidences to men, whose pity is unavailing at the best, and who not seldom increase his pain by a betrayal of trust, he ought to take refuge in the sacrament of penance, and bathe his soul in this supernatural pool of solace and relief, by telling his sins in all candor and with true sorrow to the priest, the delegate of God Himself.

Whatever prayers you intend to say before and in connection with your recital of sin in the confessional, you do well by saying and finishing before you enter the confessional. Today confessions are more frequent than they probably

have ever been in the history of the Church. Being so frequent, it is evident that they must not be unnecessarily prolonged. Whatever prayer, therefore, is not essential in the act of confession, should not be said in the confessional whenever there are a number of penitents waiting to go to confession.

Non-Essentials

The Church sanctions this practice by telling the priest he may omit, for a just cause, an unessential part of the official prayers before and after the words of absolution which, together with the contrite disposition of the penitent, form the essence of the sacrament. So if the priest may even omit these official prayers because of the number of penitents waiting to be shriven, the penitent himself need not say unnecessary prayers in the confessional.

This has reference particularly to the Confiteor, or the prayer: "I confess to Almighty God," etc. This is a beautiful, inspiring and most effective prayer that has come down to us from the first ages of Christianity. When said with attention and devotion it of itself embodies a perfect act of contrition. But it will likely not be said with much devotion when hurriedly and nervously recited in the confessional. Hence it is advisable to say this prayer leisurely and emphatically before one enters the confessional, and then to

omit it in the confessional, especially when other penitents are in line to be absolved.

Standing in Line

The expression "to stand in line" for confession is commonly used. It is well grounded, for it is seldom that ordinary Catholics can go to confession without awaiting their turn by standing in line. And usually the lines are long, and at times they seem interminable. While the sight of these lines may beget in the priest an initial impulse of dread and misgiving, by making him wonder how and when he will ever dispose of so many penitents, the same sight fills him with spiritual joy and consolation, since there is hardly a better sign of true and virile Catholicity than these frequent and apparently endless lines of eager and contrite penitents longing for their turn to tell their sins in all humility to the minister of God unto pardon and peace of soul.

The priest rejoices, too, over these wonderful lines of God-loving, sin-hating and salvation-hungry Christians, for they give him his greatest opportunity for effective priestly work. On the pulpit he speaks to and deals with his audience at large: in the confessional he addresses and deals with the individual soul. He can therefore be more specific in his counsels and warnings, more direct in his instructions, and more personal in his appeals to love God, to loathe sin, and to

strive unremittingly to attain heaven. Incidentally the long lines of penitents forming towards the confessionals all over the world week after week are perhaps the best proof that the Christian mind does not revolt against, but welcomes confession.

A Great Relief

Yet much as the priest may rejoice at seeing these lines of people making for his confessional, it would be a great relief for many a priest and also for many penitents, if our Catholics in general were just a little more considerate in forming these lines, and in keeping them within reasonable bounds; not by staying away from confession, or by approaching the confessional less frequently, but by using more judgment and common sense in the choice of the time, place and minister of their confession.

There is no reason why, when there are various periods allotted for the hearing of confessions, all the penitents should choose the same period, and consequently render it crowded, while the other periods are hardly employed at all. Many of these penitents could as well go to confession when there is much leisure for them and for the priest. Why must everyone aim to confess in the later hours of Saturday evening, for instance, when so many could go as well and better to confession in the afternoon, when the priest often

has comparatively few penitents? Why rush him mercilessly at one period, and practically abandon him at another?

Why Not Be Sensible?

And if people would sensibly divide up between the various churches in which confessions are being heard in a city, the lines would become more reasonable also. Then some priests would not be overburdened and others would not be practically forsaken in their confessionals as they now often are. Just because a certain church is handy in view of its location, or is attractive for its reputation, everybody crowds to it and, as a result, the lineup of penitents often grows unwieldy; while at the same time in other churches, in which the priests have and are glad to exercise the same power of forgiving sins, there is no line at all: all the consequence of an ill-advised and sometimes unhealthy fancy for a certain church.

The same is not seldom true regarding the confessionals in one and the same church: an almost uncontrollable line will form towards one confessional, while the other confessional or confessionals remain practically unattended. What is the idea of taxing one priest unreasonably, while the others, who could ordinarily benefit the respective penitents just as much spiritually as the overtaxed one, wait in vain for some one to engage their sacred ministry and thereby relieve the congestion at the crowded confessional?

Free Choice of a Confessor

I am by no means discountenancing the full free choice of a confessor which the Church wants every penitent to enjoy without any kind of coercion, intrusion or restraint. And I will again emphasize what I have said in another part of this book, that the penitent does well in choosing as his confessor a priest in whom he has special confidence and trust, and in remaining reasonably attached to this one confessor. Yet the disproportionate crowds we often see at the confessionals of our churches are usually not accounted for by motives of pure spirituality and a desire to progress in holiness. Not rarely these motives are very human and not always conducive to the greater spiritual good of the penitents themselves. A little more judiciousness, therefore, which would prompt them to make a more equable division of themselves and a more just apportionment towards the several confessionals, would stand them and religion on the whole in good stead.

Others, Too, Stand in Line

Still, in spite of all discretion and moderation of the penitents, there will often be a necessity for you to stand in line when you go to confession. Whatever the length and duration of it, this line should not be a deterrent to you and keep you from receiving the sacrament, or induce you

to put off its reception to some later period or, which is worse, to some indefinite time. In many affairs of life people have to stand in line if they want to be served. And how they stand in line at theatres, for example, waiting for tickets to a show that is often meaningless and tiresome, if not also shady and questionable of character. In business, too, people must frequently stand in line; also in waiting for attention on the part of a physician or dentist; or in waiting for their case to come up in court. If they value what they are waiting for, they do not mind the waiting. And what can be more valuable than the forgiveness of one's sins, and the recovery of the friendship of God and the right to heaven?

There is this difference between standing in line for mundane affairs and for confession that, while the former is commonly a more or less complete loss of time, the latter involves no such loss at all. Penitents can make their best preparation for confession while thus waiting for their turn to come. The example of the others going in and out of the confessional ought to stimulate them wholesomely unto the warmest penitence. The closer they move towards the confessional the deeper and intenser should their contrition grow. Many penitents make their entire preparation for confession—and they make it very well—while they are standing in line waiting for their turn. Others, again, seem to be woefully

distracted and mentally vacant or dissipated, to judge from their conduct or posture. Not a few are quite impatient, peevish and irritable for having to wait at all.

On the Way to God's City

The gospel relates that Jesus, "when the days of His assumption were accomplishing . . . steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke, 9, 51), so much so that the Samaritans "received Him not, because His face was of one going to Jerusalem" (ib., 53). Whoever is in line going to confession must also have his face steadfastly set to go to Jerusalem, the City of God, for he is directly on the way to it, if he is well disposed for the reception of the sacrament.

In the life of the saintly Franciscan lay-brother, Paschal Baylon, we read that even as a boy, as he was herding sheep, he made it a habit to turn his face continuously in the direction of the church and the tabernacle, since he thought of and desired and lived for nothing else than Jesus in the Most Holy Eucharist. One day, so the legend says, the walls of the church separated to expose the tabernacle clearly to his view. In a similar way it is a laudable custom for a sinner who feels the weight of his sins to turn as much as possible towards the confessional with a longing, appreciative and grateful eye. And the closer the time comes for his confession the

more concentrated should his soul's eye be on the sacred tribunal with ardent desire and lively gratitude.

How Much Time?

Having said above, that it is quite possible to make an excellent preparation for confession, in its entirety, while standing in line waiting for one's turn, I may be asked how much time the penitent should ordinarily consume in the reception of the sacrament of penance from the beginning of his preparation to the end of his thanksgiving. This depends much on the penitent and the regularity or irregularity of his life and his confessions.

A pious and God-loving Christian, who is about the business of his salvation in earnest, and who therefore approaches the sacred tribunal every month or every week; who moreover leads a careful life and closely examines his conscience daily, can easily make his confession, comprising every part of it, in about ten or fifteen minutes. Four or five minutes will do him for his examination of conscience and his act of contrition. If he committed a mortal sin it will stand out in his conscience so hideously and reprovngly that he does not have to seek long to locate it. His venial sins, too, since they are usually much the same at each confession, will come back to him without difficulty; and if they should not,

there will be no harm, since they need not be confessed. In two or three minutes he can easily despatch his recital of sins and receive the absolution from the priest. In another four or five minutes he can say his penance and make a brief but intense thanksgiving.

The Virtue of Concentration

This computation presupposes that the penitent really and actually employs all this time or, as they say nowadays, that he is all there. With regard to confession as well as to all other matters some can do as much and more in five minutes than others do in an hour. The former are concentrated, while the latter are dissipated in their thoughts and efforts.

Not along ago the papers brought the account of a young New York chorus girl marrying an old, but very wealthy man. He promised her, among other things, that after their marriage he would take her on a trip to Honolulu. Her girl chums rather envied her for what they considered her good fortune in marrying a millionaire, and they asked her how she succeeded in making so wondrous a conquest. She replied: "It was easy; I simply concentrated."

But when the wedding ceremony was over the old lover seemed to forget his prenuptial promises. They got as far as Denver on their honeymoon trip when he grew tired and resolved to return to

his home in the east. She had to accompany him back, of course. It was not long and she was thoroughly disgusted with her husband, so much so that she got a divorce. She then returned to New York to resume her role on the stage. Her girl friends welcomed her back, and asked her what she intended to do. "I suppose I shall have to concentrate again," she said rather nonchalantly.

The girl's views on marriage were not commendable, but her belief in and her use of the power of concentration showed no little practical psychological acumen. In spiritual exercises, particularly in the reception of the sacrament of penance, no trait in the penitent is more serviceable and effective than the salutary concentration of his mind and heart on what he is about. An instance of counterfeit concentration was given by the little girl who seemed all attention during the minister's sermon, but who said later: "Mama, did you notice how the lump in that man's throat went up and down?"

St. Clement Hofbauer, the Redemptorist, was a great and most successful apostle in Vienna, Austria, in the beginning of the last century. He was the regular confessor of a community of nuns. One day, when he put in his appearance at the convent in order to hear the confessions of the Sisters, the doorkeeper looked surprised, and told him that the Sisters were not expecting him on that particular day. There was

a misunderstanding somewhere. Clement said, however: "I am here now, and I can not well come again this week, owing to my many other duties. Tell the Sisters, therefore, they should please hurry and come to confession, as I shall be waiting for them in the chapel."

The saint made for the chapel and, after a brief adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament, he sat in the confessional. He waited almost a half hour before the Sisters began coming to confession. The older Sisters felt that he was peeved because of the delay, and they dreaded to enter the confessional as the first ones, fearing they would get a sharp rebuke from Clement. They therefore sent a novice, who was innocent and ignorant of the whole situation, as the first penitent to the saint, thinking if she got a scolding from him, it would not sting her much, since she had no part in the matter whatever; and again, being young, it would do her good to be humiliated. She entered the confessional fully unconscious of the situation. She soon came out again, apparently none the worse.

The older Sisters hurriedly asked her how the confessor behaved towards her: whether he was peevish and fretful. She answered that he was as sweet and gracious as ever. So the senior Sisters went to him with an easy heart. But he was direct and abrupt towards them, and asked them what their purpose was in keeping him

waiting with his ministrations. They answered that they could not help it, as they first had to prepare for confession, which required time. "Do not speak foolishly," the saint replied. And he added with a distinct note of indignation: "A nun should always be ready for two things: to die, and to go to confession."

According to Clement, then, a nun—and the same applies to every God-loving person—should always be able, at a moment's notice, to go to confession worthily and profitably. On my part, I fully believe and heartily endorse what the saint said. I am convinced that a person who habitually lives in the love and fear of God—and there are ever so many of them in and outside the convents—can at any time dispose himself towards a good and perfect contrition, which has been described in a previous chapter. And once he has genuine contrition, the other parts of the preparation create no difficulty.

The same view that Clement held in regard to getting ready for confession St. Philip Neri held with reference to the celebration of holy Mass by the priests under his care. We read in his life that he did not want his priests, as a rule, to know beforehand the hour at which they were to celebrate the holy sacrifice; he desired that they should be at the beck and call of their superior, so that they might be always ready to say holy Mass.

A Sane Reflection

While we easily understand the motives of these saints in making assertions and dispositions of this nature regarding the preparation for the holy sacraments; and while we all agree, in particular, that a virtuous person can worthily receive the sacrament of penance in a very brief time: still we also know that the grace obtained through the actual reception of the sacraments depends in no slight measure on the actual fervor of the recipient. And this actual fervor is usually increased by an intense preparation. Pious people, therefore, may use much more time than has been indicated—ten or fifteen minutes—in receiving the sacrament of penance, and this unto considerable spiritual profit and growth in holiness. But when this time is prolonged merely through scrupulosity, it is usually not only poorly employed, but rather entirely lost. Outside of sinning, there are not many ways of wasting time more thoroughly and irrevocably than by maudlin scrupulosity.

Undue Haste

On the other hand there are numerous penitents who through mere indifference and listlessness, and from a horror for spiritual concentration, employ as little time as possible in the reception of the sacrament of penance. Although their life is by no means religious and godlike, they

seem to fall in with St. Clement's aforesaid view, inasmuch as they are or seem to be always ready to go to confession. When they see a chance to approach the priest no sooner they enter the church, they can not and do not wait, but enter the confessional without further preparation. And they are hardly dismissed from the confessional, when they hasten to leave church.

These penitents, if they are penitents, derive little, if any, fruit from such confessions, which are purely mechanical and perfunctory, and whose main objective seems to be speed, and not supernatural value and gain. Not rarely these confessions are positively irreverent, unworthy and sacrilegious. The Lord threatens such penitents, when He says: "Cursed be he that doth the work of the Lord deceitfully" (Jer., 4, 8, 10).

The Litany of the Saints

A boy returned from confession much sooner than his mother expected him. She asked him how he got through so soon, and whether he said his penance. He answered that the priest had given him the Litany of the Saints to say as a penance. His mother retorted that he could not have prayed that long litany in so short a time. "Why not?" rejoined the boy, who was more bright than pious. "I took my prayer-book and opened it where the litany begins. I passed my fingers over the pages of the saints and said:

All the saints on these pages: pray for us. Then I did the same with the following pages and said: O Lord, from all these evils deliver us. Finally, regarding the remaining pages I said: Through all these holy mysteries, O Lord, we pray Thee, hear us. Then I was through." To judge by their haste quite a number of penitents seem to make their preparation and thanksgiving for holy penance in the same summary and superficial manner. As we turn to God, so God turns to us. It is wholesome to bear this in mind.

He Moved Fast

A story is also told of a man who, in going the Way of the Cross privately, moved from station to station so rapidly that in about two minutes he completed his visits to the fourteen stations. When asked why he hurried so, he replied, hypocritically, no doubt: "I can not bear to see our dear Lord suffer so much." Such seems to be the attitude of those who hasten unbecomingly through their confession or the sacrament of penance, rendered possible to us through our Savior's death.

It is, however, a bad sign today, now that the actual suffering of Jesus is over, not to be able to contemplate His passion and death with pious leisure, lingering compassion, loving appreciation, and burning sorrow for the sins which

were the cause of it. To be impatient in this contemplation and to get away from it as soon as possible bespeaks a lack of gratitude to Jesus and a want of true realization of what is best for one's soul. One of the most stinging rebukes our Lord ever gave, and which very clearly revealed the hurt inflicted upon His divine Heart, was expressed with regard to the ungrateful lepers who failed to come and thank Him after He had cured them from their dire disease. "Jesus...said: Were not ten made clean? and where are the nine?" (Luke, 17, 17.)

Eager for Spiritual Direction

If one is returning from a long life of sin; or is making a general confession covering a considerable period of life; or is eager for particular spiritual direction from his confessor: in these and similar cases as much time is required as the individual penitent stands in need of. No limit or average can be stated for this need, since it depends so much on the personal element of the penitent, which is variable and different in all men.

Speaking of and to strictly cloistered nuns St. Alphonsus says they should ordinarily not be in the confessional beyond fifteen minutes. These nuns usually pursued a close method of spiritual direction in the confessional. Every week they revealed to their confessor their whole

inner selves: both foibles and virtues, together with their personal experiences in prayer, their progress, helps, difficulties and reverses in the practice of goodness and holiness.

The Value of Spiritual Direction

There are numerous people in convents or in the world who yearn for and practice this spiritual direction in our day. When properly and prudently given and complied with it has distinct advantages for the souls who are the beneficiaries of it. They succeed in having a better knowledge of themselves; they are kept in becoming humility through being continually reminded of their faults and told to do better by their director; they are guided in focusing their attention on their ruling passion or predominant weakness, and are encouraged, when their successes and gains are pointed out to them, to continue the struggle for mastery over themselves unto higher perfection and brighter virtue; they are instructed as to what manner of prayer suits their condition best, and by what points of particular examination of conscience they would be likely to profit most. Their rejoicing is moderated in prosperity; their sadness is lightened in adversity; their mind is kept in unfailing composure, and their heart in abiding peace by this spiritual direction.

The Spiritual Director

They who aim to enjoy this kind of very personal and individual guidance must above all choose a confessor in whose direction they can acquiesce with absolute trust and obedience, and who, on his part is willing to be their especial spiritual monitor and guide. Then they must use good sense in making demands upon his time and attention. In consideration of his various duties they should not enlist his services when he is busy with other matters or a number of other penitents, since they can not expect him to neglect others in order to be able to abound in their regard.

In general, these pious penitents should not abuse the confessor's kindness, nor expect more of him than he can render; for after all, independently of all direction, and waiving the consideration of the power of grace, each one is mostly responsible for his advancement or retardment in virtue. If on this earth everyone is in a way the creator of his own destiny, due to the free will that God has given him, so, too, for the life to come each one seems to be entrusted by God, with the help of His grace, to be his own spiritual architect, to carve his own niche, or build his own mansion, in the realm of heaven.

CHAPTER XXVII.

In the Confessional

"My tears have been my bread day and night, whilst it is said to me daily: Where is thy God? . . . I shall go over into the place of the wonderful tabernacle, even to the house of God" (Ps. 41, 4, 5).

AN INNOCENT little girl came home from school crying. Her mother asked her what it was all about. The child answered: "Sister said that we are to go to confession this afternoon, and I can't go." The mother asked her why she could not go. The girl replied naively: "I only had one sin, and I have forgotten what it was." The mother smiled at the sweet simplicity of the child, and helped it to find the lost sin.

The case is not so amusing when adults come to confession without knowing what sins they have done, or how to say those they remember having done. This happens quite often. It is one of the great trials of the priest when the penitent, instead of examining his own conscience, as is his duty, throws the entire burden of it upon the confessor. It means a disagreeable and thankless labor for the priest. Ferreting out sin

after sin from a poorly disposed penitent is like trying to recover a cork that has fallen into a bottle or, as the common expression has it, like pulling teeth. It is a most distasteful and trying task.

Why Priests Die Young

Some time ago I learned of a missionary making the statement that one reason many priests die young is this lack of consideration on the part of slothful and listless penitents. How much they contribute towards shortening priests' lives I am not in a position to say; but to every reflecting observer it is plain that they materially and altogether unnecessarily increase the ordeal of the confessional, which is immensely greater for the confessor than it is for any penitent.

In view of this every thoughtful penitent is careful, before he enters the confessional, to know just what he has, or wants, to say to the priest, and how to say it, according to his capacity, of course. As long as he does his part and manifests a willingness to do what he can, the priest is glad to administer to him whatever help he may require. It is only when the penitent shows little or no interest in finding and telling his sins, that the priest feels hurt and grieved. What hurts him most is not so much the labor he has to expend because of another's negligence, but

the reflection that the disposition of the penitent is very questionable because of his listlessness in preparing himself for the reception of the sacrament.

No matter what tale of spiritual wreckage and woe the sinner may have to tell, the priest hears his story and helps him in saying it with a certain consolation and gratification in his priestly heart, as long as he feels the penitent is really sincere, and fully contrite, and positively minded to amend his ways: whereas, whenever the priest must harbor a well-founded suspicion that the penitent is not properly disposed and ready to quit his sins, the hearing of the respective confession, whatever may be the gist of it, becomes a veritable pain to him.

Half of the Austrian Army

In the previous chapter I told a story referring to St. Clement Hofbauer as confessor of nuns. It is related of the same saint that, when he was appointed as the regular confessor of what was considered the most distinguished nunnery of Vienna in his day, a baron, who was a close friend of Clement, took occasion to congratulate the saint on his appointment, saying it must be a great honor and no slight pleasure to be the confessor of angels in the flesh. At this compliment Clement, who was a very matter-of-fact and plain man, and who always took a sober and common

sense view of persons and things, grew quite serious and said: "Friend, do not speak foolishly. I want to tell you that I should rather hear the confessions of half the Austrian army than of a dozen nuns."

This assertion of the saint no doubt surprises many, and may even shock some, of the readers. Yet he merely stated regarding himself what Jesus declared when He said: "They that are well have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. For I came not to call the just, but sinners" (Mark, 2, 17). While there is considerable consolation for a priest in helping to keep the ninety-nine faithful sheep close to their divine Shepherd, he derives immensely more joy from reclaiming the sheep that was lost and leading it back to Jesus. Such is his joy and gratification in this process in fact, that he prefers the very arduous and strenuous work of recovering ninety-nine lost sheep to the very easy work of watching over one that has never been lost. This explains why every priest gets infinitely greater solace from the most lurid story of a great sinner, who is obviously through with sin forever, than from the story of but slight faults and imperfections of a person who is evidently safe and secure in loyalty to God.

To judge from the way they act in the confessional many penitents "shall be compared to a man beholding his own countenance in a glass. For he beheld himself, and went his way, and

presently forgot what manner of man he was" (James, 1, 23, 24). They may have looked into the mirror of their conscience before entering the confessional, but they give no evidence of this when they are in the confessional, for their mind, as far as the remembrance and recital of sins are concerned, is a complete blank. They have nothing to say, and the priest must examine their conscience for them all over again. At times this is a nervous affection for which these penitents are more to be pitied than blamed. But often their mental vacancy in the sacred tribunal is due to inertia, indifference and listlessness, and therefore bespeaks a want of the proper disposition in these penitents so-called. I say "so-called", for they are usually anything but penitents.

It Is a Holy Place

About to enter the confessional, remember that it is a holy place. In it, on the very spot on which you are about to kneel, miracles of salvation have been performed. Greater sinners than you have knelt there to be transformed within a few minutes into veritable saints. Men and women, young and old, of your disposition and constitution, fighting the same spiritual battles, agitated by the same ruling passion, living in the same seductive environment, oppressed by the same personal weakness as you, have knelt there to rise after a few short instants, not only cor-

porally, but even more spiritually, to fall into mortal sin no more, but to remain loyal and close to God forever after.

There have knelt there those who entered the confessional faint-hearted, not at all sure of themselves, for their spirit indeed was willing, but the flesh weak (Matt., 26, 41): who left it brave, hopeful and fearless, as though God had said to them as to St. Paul: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity" (2 Cor., 12, 9). Such have knelt there, too, whose mind seemed hopelessly perplexed, whose soul was covered with a dense fog of desolation and uncertainty, and whose conscience was a victim to endless scruples and harassing fears: they no sooner received the grace of the sacrament when the ugly mist was lifted from their souls, perplexity fled from their mind, and all the scruples and trepidations made room for heavenly peace and ineffable consolation.

Finally, they have knelt there who were undecided as to God's will in their behalf, with reference to their vocation, or some other important business of life; or knowing their call or their duty, they quailed and trembled at the thought of its assumption: before they quit the confessional a light of heaven, as it were, shone round about them, every doubt as to their calling was dispelled, and they seemed to hear the voice of the Lord saying unto them in the darkness of the

confessional as He spoke to Paul in the darkness of the night: "Do not fear . . . because I am with thee" (Acts, 18, 9, 10). In truth, the place you are entering is holy.

Curtained from View

When you enter the confessional, as the confessionals now are, you usually have to push aside the curtain or open the door at the entrance, which curtain or door shields you from the view of others while you are in the confessional. The reflection may appear trivial, but this curtain of the confessional in a way reminds one of the curtain the photographers use to shield themselves from intruding light while they are focusing the apparatus on an object or scene that is to be photographed.

In the confessional you are to exhibit a photograph of your innermost soul, just as it is, without any artistic retouching that would make its ugly spots disappear or look less hideous than they are in reality. The saying of the notorious Oliver Cromwell comes to mind. While he was posing for a portrait of himself that was being made by a famous painter of his day, he said brusquely: "I want you to paint me just as I am: warts and all." Even so we must paint or photograph our intimate life in the confessional.

The Image of Salvation

But before you begin your recital of sin, you must become aware of a very important object in the confessional on the penitent's side. It is the crucifix, the image of our Lord suffering and dying for you, which the Church prescribes should adorn every confessional in a way as to be distinctly seen by the penitent. There is a deep purpose in this.

As the priest, when celebrating holy Mass, or the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, begins and ends the august act, by reverently bowing to and greeting the crucifix, in recognition of the fact, that all the efficacy of the divine Sacrifice and Sacrament flows from our Savior's death on the Cross: so, too, it is just and meet that he who receives the sacrament of penance realize vividly and appreciate wholeheartedly the consoling truth, that all the power of the sacrament issues from the death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary.

The penitent, therefore, looks upon the crucifix in the confessional as the Jews, sick to die, looked upon the brazen serpent in the desert. As soon as they gazed upon it, they were cured. The loving and trusting gaze of the contrite penitent upon the crucifix hanging before him in the confessional at once cures his soul from its sickness unto death.

A Glance of Love

But for our Lord's death on the Cross for you, you would not be kneeling in that confessional with a promise of having your sins forgiven. It required so horrid a death of the only begotten and dearly beloved Son of God Himself to procure so great and infinite a boon for you. In appreciation of this you will never fail, as you enter the confessional, to cast a glance of burning love, of deep gratitude and intense sorrow for your sins upon this dear divine emblem of your redemption and salvation. The sight of it will at the same time hearten you to tell your sins humbly and sincerely, unto your utter humiliation and annihilation, on the one hand; and with the utmost trust and confidence in God's mercy on the other. While glancing at the crucifix, recall the sweet words of St. Francis of Assisi, the great lover of Jesus Crucified: "We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee, because by Thy holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world."

A Deathbed Conversion

A man who had spent a life-time in the perpetration of robbery, murder and other horrid crimes ended by being an absolute wreck physically and morally. Being homeless and friendless, and suffering from a deadly illness, he was given refuge in the hospital of the Sisters. It was evident he had not long to live. The nun who

nursed him was a woman of God, every inch of her. She felt she should look more to the needs of his soul which could still be saved than to the requirements of his body which was doomed to impending dissolution.

The good Sister gave the man a blessed crucifix. She told him to hold it in his hands before him and fix his eyes upon it. Naturally and spontaneously, with all sweetness and unction, she began to tell him of the infinite love of Jesus for us, exhibited on the Cross. She emphasized how this love melted the cold and hard heart of the thief hanging to the right of Him unto saving faith and contrition.

The Gift of Tears

Gradually this description of our Lord's love by one of His devoted spouses, and the fixed view of the crucified Jesus so affected the criminal that his heart softened unto the warmest and intensest love of his Savior, and unto overwhelming sorrow for his sins. This sorrow was so penetrating and all-possessing that he could not restrain his tears. He wept incessantly for having offended God Whom He now loved so much. The Sister had to supply him with one kerchief after the other, for no sooner he got them he drenched them with his tears of utter sorrow for sin and ardent love for Jesus. While exhibiting these holy sentiments in undiminished

fervor, after he had received the last sacraments, he died with a smile of repentant love and soothing hope on his lips, while he clutched the dear crucifix in his hands and pressed it to his heart.

The Angel of Justice

A saintly man, who lay sick on a bed near by, having heard of this sinner's wicked life, and being told that he was dying, wondered in his mind how the poor man's soul would fare in judgment. God vouchsafed him a vision of the judgment of this unfortunate, yet fortunate, sinner. The angel of God's justice placed on one disc of the scales the man's sins and crimes. The disc went down to the extreme bottom with a thud, for the weight was immensely heavy. The saintly man asked anxiously: "By what manner will this miserable sinner be able to counterbalance so tremendous a weight to right the scales in his favor?"

Then he saw the angel place one of the penitent's kerchiefs, moistened with his tears of sorrow and love for Jesus Crucified, on the other disc. At once it weighted down the disc with an irresistible force to the extremity of its reach, whereby the other disc flew into the air as though it held nothing whatever in the man's disfavor. This story merely illustrates the emphatic teaching of our holy faith that one single tear shed by the sinner from pure love of our Lord on the Cross,

and from consequent sorrow for sin, will wipe from his soul and from the very memory of God whatsoever sins and iniquities he may be guilty of. Hence the crucifix in the confessional and the value of adverting to it with devotion.

“Make It Snappy”

Let your actual recital of sin be candid, contrite, distinct, comprehensive and brief. Say what is necessary for your purpose, and no more. Do not admit matter that is extraneous or foreign to your confession into your sacramental story. Say your various points as concisely and pithily as you are able, avoiding all superfluous phrasing, transitions, explanations and circumlocutions. The slang phrase, “Make it snappy,” may sound profane in this connection, but it is as significant as any more elegant one, and the priest will appreciate your reasonable observance of it in confessing your sins. Start to observe it from the very beginning of your confession. Use no unnecessary, albeit pious, introduction, but plunge, as they say in rhetoric, immediately into the business for which you come into the confessional.

In former days, even unto the beginning of this century, when confessions were not nearly so numerous as they are now, since the re-introduction of the widespread practice of frequent Communion and the Communion of little children, the confession formulas taught to the children

and others were rather long. Now the more abbreviated the formula, the more serviceable and welcome it is to the confessor and the waiting penitents. As soon as you enter the confessional, and before you have a chance to say a word, the priest blesses you and calls down the Holy Ghost upon you so you may make a good confession. You therefore are to make the sign of the cross while you say at once: "Father, my last confession was a week—a month—etc.,—ago. I have" . . . Here you tell your sins. You finish by saying either: "I am sorry for all my sins;" or: "In my former life I" . . . Here you include some sin according to the direction given in the preceding chapter.

"Father"

From the above you will infer that you need not say the words of the sign of the cross with which you start your confession. (This sign of the cross, by the way, is to remind you again of the fact that you owe your prospective forgiveness of sins to our Lord's death on the Cross for you.) Nor are you to mention that you got absolution in your previous confession, and that you said your penance. Unless you state the contrary, the priest takes all this for granted. You begin your confession by saying: "Father," since you look upon the priest as your spiritual father, who will restore to you, in case you lost it through

mortal sin, the divine privilege of being an adopted child of God. Again, you say "Father," in order to actuate yourself to speak to the priest with all openness, trust and confidence, even as a child speaks to its loving and sympathetic father, or as the Prodigal Son started his humble confession by saying: "Father."

Be Yourself

Some people, who are altogether natural and unembarrassed in speaking to a priest outside of the confessional, appear not to be able to "be themselves", to use the language of the day, when they are in the confessional. There they are nervous, fidgety, embarrassed and non-plussed, if not in actual torture. There is absolutely no reason for this change of attitude. The confessional, in its present arrangement, is intended, by the privacy and secrecy which it affords the individual, to render the recital of sin easier than it would be if, as was the case in olden times, it would have to be made in the open, or face to face, albeit privately.

The confessional, as it is now, seems to have been introduced in the churches as late as the beginning of the sixteenth century. If my memory serves me right, the first historical record of a confessional dates back to the year 1512. It was used in Spain, I believe, and from there it was gradually introduced into all the countries

of the Catholic world. The Church enjoins that the confessions of women, outside of cases of sickness or other grave necessity, must be heard only in the confessional. The confessions of men and boys may be heard in any respectable place, even outside the confessional.

Confessions in Rome

In Rome, for instance, the American pilgrim will marvel at first when he sees crowds of men standing close about a priest, seated on a chair somewhere in the church or sacristy, and hearing the confessions of one after the other. The proximity of the waiting crowd seems not to discomfit the actual penitent in the least. Not seldom you notice priests and monsignori among the penitents. It is a sight which, properly evaluated, is rather edifying than otherwise.

As to the time which has elapsed since your last confession, it is not of itself necessary to mention it, provided you say all the sins you have to confess. Of course, if you missed an obligatory annual confession, you would have to state it. And if the priest should inquire as to the time of your previous confession to be informed regarding the frequency of your relapses into mortal sin, for instance, you would be obliged to tell him how long ago you made your antecedent confession. But if a person confesses every week, as a rule, but happens to miss a week;

or if he approaches another confessor during the week, and dislikes informing his ordinary confessor of it for some good reason, he may well start his confession by saying: "Father, since my last confession I have," etc. Ordinarily it is salutary to follow the general custom of pious Christians and carefully state the time of the previous confession. Yet since it is in itself not required, and since it may serve a troubled penitent to know this to save him from possible embarrassment or unnecessary worry, its statement in this place is not superfluous.

Avoid Precipitancy

While stress has been laid on the need of the penitent "making it snappy", or being alert and expeditious in making his confession, it is wise to remember that this snappiness is not synonymous with undue haste or precipitancy. This is as undesirable and harmful a quality as sluggishness or hesitancy. The golden mean is the best. The old Romans expressed it in the adage: "*Festina lente*," which means: Hasten slowly. Be on the move, but proceed deliberately and cautiously. Use all the time you require for your confession according to your personal temperament, capacity and other circumstances. Say your story to the priest in a whisper that is audible and distinct in its utterances, so he can hear you without strain or difficulty. Many penitents

Speak so softly or confusedly as though they did not want the priest to hear or understand them. Others speak so loud, that they can be heard outside the confessional. Follow the golden midway.

Asking Questions

If you desire to obtain information regarding matters of conscience do not hesitate to request it of your confessor. State your difficulty or inquiry as clearly and briefly as possible, and the priest will advise and guide you. Whether your doubts refer to what is right or wrong in business, or in the relations of holy marriage, or courtship, or with regard to restitution, or any other misgiving or trouble of soul: take heart and ask the priest for light instead of continuing to act with a doubtful conscience.

Ever so many other penitents have submitted and are submitting the same difficulties to their confessors for solution: why then should you shrink from doing it, and thus consulting your peace of mind and the welfare of your soul? If you put a question to the priest, do it immediately after you finish your confession proper, by saying: "Please, Father, is it wrong, etc.?" Some sin may come to light through your question; hence it is in order that it be manifested at once; at least before the priest imparts the absolution.

When the Confessor Quizzes You

The priest may also ask you questions, not through motives of curiosity, but from a sense of duty. He feels he ought to have additional information regarding your manner of life and, especially, your disposition of soul with reference to the reception of the sacrament. Then, too, he may be convinced, or have good reasons to suspect, that you have omitted some essential point in your confession, which it is his obligation to assist you in supplying. Hence his questions. Do not take them amiss or grow nervous and upset, let alone hurt or insulted, because they are being put to you. Answer in a reverent, humble, calm, easy, brief and candid manner, without evasion or subterfuge, even as the patient who is corporally ill, replies readily and frankly to the questions addressed to him by the physician whose only purpose in asking the questions is the cure and well-being of his client. The confessor's one aim in making inquiries of you is your spiritual cure and advancement.

The Language of Confession

In what language are you to confess your sins? In the language which you use easiest and best, provided the priest understands it. In our country, which is known as the melting pot of all nations, there are many American-born children of foreign parents who learned their prayers and catechism,

and were instructed in the manner of going to confession, in the native language of their parents. Since then, however, they have quite forgotten this language, which they have never known too well, and outside of repeating the stereotyped list of sins drilled into their minds when they were young they find it difficult to express themselves in a free and understandable manner in the foreign tongue. On the other hand they speak English nicely and correctly, and in their business and social relations they never use any other tongue. The only time they use the foreign language is when they go to confession or when they are about their religious devotions. In consequence they are often not a little hampered and bewildered when they want to tell their sins and add certain explanations they consider necessary in connection with them.

They Do Not Know the Prayers

What they ought to do is to start at once and henceforth confess in English. There is no reason in the world why they should not do this sensible thing. Some recoil from confessing in English because they do not know the confession prayers in English. These they can say in any language they choose, but before they enter or, respectively, after they leave the confessional. In the confessional they should recite no prayers aloud, but follow the formula given above, which is admit-

tedly easy and short. In telling their sins in English they will not find the difficulty they anticipate. They may feel somewhat embarrassed the first time they venture it, but this embarrassment will hardly be as great as is their embarrassment when speaking a foreign tongue as faultily as they do; and, too, this feeling will soon vanish, and they will enjoy a distinct relief in confessing ever after.

In fact even those, who are foreign-born, but have been residents of this country for years and years, and transact all their business in English, do well in learning how to confess in English, the sooner the better. Priests understanding the foreign languages of certain contingencies of our people are becoming rarer from day to day. People travel much nowadays. Hence if one wants to have the opportunity of going to confession regularly and frequently, and does not care to oblige himself to go to just one or the other priest, he is wise in acquiring the knowledge and practice of confessing in the language of the land.

You Get Advice

After you have finished the recital of your sins in the confessional the priest, if he considers it necessary or advisable, will give you a personal advice or admonition, to which you will listen with attention and which you will accept with docility. Do not be thinking of your confession,

whether you made it properly or not, while the priest is speaking to you; but give him your ear and your mind. If he says nothing in the way of an exhortation, do not take it amiss, but rather consider it a compliment. The priest is satisfied that you are trying your best and do not stand in need of any particular reprimand, warning or counsel. Confessions being as frequent as they now are, the priest has no time to give an elaborate lecture or sermon to each individual penitent. Besides, if the penitent uses the opportunities offered him, he can hear plenty of good practical sermons from the pulpit in the church.

Thanks for the Penance

When the priest gives you a penance, you say: "Thank you, Father." You thereby let him know that you have understood the penance. Moreover you are thankful that for so slight a penance you receive so large a pardon. In case you have not understood the penance, humbly ask the priest to repeat it, saying: "Please, Father, what is my penance?" If you fear you can not perform the penance imposed upon you by the priest, respectfully submit your fear to his judgment, saying: "Father, I fear I may not be able to say or do this penance, because," etc. In a word, deal with your confessor as a trusting child deals with its father: freely, familiarly, albeit reverently and confidingly.

After her first confession an innocent little girl came home crying bitterly. When her mother asked her the cause of it she replied: "The priest told me to say three Hail Marys for my penance, and I only know one."

"Before the Pump?"

An old Irish lady, who had gone to confession to the English Dominican Father Wilberforce, related that as a penance he asked her to pray five Our Fathers for the pope. When he dismissed her, she asked naively: "Father, did you say I should pray five Our Fathers before the pump?" Her question no doubt amused the pious and kind priest not a little. At all events, some penitents can not understand the penance, because they are deaf. They should ask to go to confession in the place appointed for the confessions of the deaf. Others do not understand the penance because, instead of listening attentively to the priest, they are thinking of who knows what while the penance is being assigned them.

A Guessing Contest

They tell of a man who had a mind to be flippant in the confessional. He had not confessed for a whole year, and when the priest asked him the number of his sins, for instance how often he neglected to hear Mass on Sundays, instead of answering directly and properly, he would say:

“Father, guess how often.” The priest asked if it was five times. The man replied, saying: “Guess again, Father.” The priest successively said: ten, fifteen, twenty times. Each time he was told to try once more. Finally, when he said: twenty-five times, the irreverent penitent told him he had hit on the right number. So it went on with each different kind of sin.

When the priest’s turn came, he told the sinner that as a penance he should say the rosary. When the latter asked, how often he should say it, the priest said: “Guess how often.” The man said: “Once?” The priest rejoined: “Guess again.” The penitent continued to ask if he was to say it five, ten, fifteen or twenty times. The priest bade him each time to guess some more. Finally when the man inquired if he was to say the rosary twenty-five times, the priest said: “You struck it.”

A Rosary for Every Mortal Sin

This is a mere story, of course, and perhaps not sufficiently in keeping with the reverence due the sacrament of penance. But I have told it to ask my readers, how they would feel if they always had to pray a rosary for every mortal sin confessed. And yet at that the proportion would be very light and altogether in favor of the penitent. When you reflect upon this you will realize how much reason you have to thank the priest heartily

for being so considerate in imposing a sacramental penance upon you. Another lesson this story conveys is that you should not expect the priest to guess certain things which you ought to tell him outright; for instance, if you have sinned against chastity, that you are married, or have a vow of chastity, as the case may be.

With regard to the penance it is noteworthy, that it is to be understood just as it is imposed: no more and no less. If the priest, for instance, says: "Pray five Our Fathers," the Hail Marys and Glorys are not included. One may say them; but there is no obligation to that effect. In case through preoccupation or involuntary distraction you did not advert to the penance given you in the confessional, and this only occurs to you after you leave it, you may return to the priest to ask him concerning it, if this can be done conveniently; or, if your sins were about the same as in other confessions, you may say the penance you usually receive.

An Invalid Confession

As has been stated in another portion of this book, if one from the beginning was minded not to say or perform the penance given him, he would confess invalidly and sacrilegiously. If one receives a grievous penance for one or more mortal sins, and is willing to perform it, he receives the sacrament worthily, as far as this part of it is

concerned. But if later on he neglects to say the penance, either altogether, or a large portion of it, he commits a mortal sin. Whereas if the penance imposed was slight, given as it was for venial sins, the wilful neglect of it is a venial sin; so is the voluntary omission of a small portion of a penance given for mortal sins.

After the priest has given you the penance he proceeds to speak the words of absolution by which he administers the sacrament. He begins by elevating his hand towards you as a sign that the Holy Spirit is about to descend upon you. He at the same time recites a preliminary prayer calling on our Lord to forgive you your sins. Then he says: "I absolve you from your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." When he says these words the sacrament is accomplished and its marvelous effects upon the soul are produced, provided the penitent is truly contrite.

The Effects of Absolution

All the confessed mortal sins; all the forgotten mortal sins; all the doubtful mortal sins; all the doubtful confessions and Communions; and all the deprecated venial sins of the penitent's entire past life are completely forgiven once for all through these few words of absolution. And whatever terrible sinner the penitent was before they were uttered; and however crimson his soul

was with sin; and how far he was away from God; and remote from heaven; and near to the pit of eternal damnation: no sooner they are spoken, he is justified in the sight of God; his soul is washed whiter than snow; he is encircled by the very arms of God and pressed close to His heart; he is wrested from the jaws of hell and given a claim to the kingdom of heaven. The priest speaks these sacred words not in his own name, but in the Name and by the authority of Jesus Christ. Hence he uses the first person of the verb. He does not say: "Christ absolves you," etc., but: "I absolve you," etc., since he is personifying our Savior Himself.

Renew the Act of Contrition

While the priest says the formula of the absolution, it is the part of the penitent to renew the act of contrition and the purpose of amendment with all fervor and directness. The more contrite the soul is at the imparting of the sacrament, the greater amount of habitual and sacramental grace will it derive from it. It is foolish and harmful, therefore, for the penitent to waste this precious time in idle scruples and ill-advised worries as to whether he said all his sins, and in the way he should have said them. He did what he could at the time, and God was satisfied with his effort; he should therefore be satisfied with it also and let it rest at that.

Do not make the act of contrition in so loud a manner that you disturb the priest in the pronunciation of the sacramental words. Make it silently, but pleadingly, in your heart. Either say the formula of contrition as you know it by memory or, preferably, say some ardent ejaculation, such as: "O Jesus, mercy!" "My God and my all!" "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee: I am not worthy to be called Thy son: make me as one of Thy hired servants" (Luke, 15, 18, 19). "Lord, I am not worthy" (Matt., 8, 8), etc.

It may help your disposition of soul if, while being absolved, you fancy yourself in the place of St. Peter, at whom our Lord cast the glance of loving forgiveness; or of the Prodigal Son, about whose neck his father fell with an eager welcome; or of St. Mary Magdalen, or the penitent adulteress, both of whose sins were immediately forgiven with exuberant mercy and loving compassion.

Wait for the Sign

When the priest, in speaking the words of absolution, makes the sign of the cross over you—another solemn reminder that all the divine efficacy of the sacrament is derived from our Lord's death on the Cross for you—you bless yourself and, when he says: "God bless you," you answer: "Thank you, Father," and with that

you leave the confessional. Do not rise to leave until the confessor gives you this or a similar sign. Some penitents depart from the confessional before the priest has the time to absolve them. In consequence, even though the priest hurriedly pronounces the words after they are gone, it may be doubtful if they really receive absolution, since the necessary physical presence of the defendant before the judge may not be sufficiently verified in their case.

In leaving the confessional, cast another loving and grateful glance at the crucifix before you, saying again in your heart the beautiful words: "We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee, because by Thy holy Cross Thou hast redeemed the world."

Two girls went to confession to an old and venerable priest of God. When they came out of church one said to the other: "My, wasn't that priest ugly-looking?" The other earnestly replied: "Oh, what have you said! That was the archbishop. You must go back and confess it." The frightened girl returned to confession and said: "Father, I was here before, but when I got out of church I said you were ugly." The man of God rejoined: "Child, that was no sin. It was the truth." This humble admission of physical ungainliness on the part of a high dignitary was highly edifying, but it did not eliminate the defect. Every humble and contrite confession of moral and spiritual ugliness

in the confessional, however, immediately removes it and replaces it by divine and ravishing loveliness.

As you issue from the confessional you may in your outward appearance be the same as when you entered it. The other worshipers in church notice no difference in you whatever. Yet what a vast difference there often is between the soul of the penitent who leaves the confessional and the same soul of the humble penitent when he entered the sacred tribunal! There is, to repeat a common illustration, about the same difference as there is between water, that has gone through a fine filter and is consequently clear and pure, and water that was muddy and full of impurities; or between gold that has been purified in the crucible, and gold that is heavily mixed with dross.

And, to rise to a higher plane, there is a similar difference between the penitent's soul after and before his approach to the court of mercy as there was between our Lord's risen body and his mangled and deformed body laid in the grave. "Therefore, if you be risen with Christ, seek the things that are above; where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Mind the things that are above, not the things that are upon the earth. For you are dead; and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ shall appear, who is your life, then you also shall appear with Him in glory" (Col., 3, 1-4).

CHAPTER XXVIII.

After Confession

"I will praise Thee, O Lord, my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify Thy Name forever: for Thy mercy is great towards me: and Thou hast delivered my soul out of the lower hell" (Ps. 85, 12, 13).

IN the touching story of the Prodigal Son we observe that after his confession to and loving reception by his father the young man did not speak a word. His brother had a remark of some length to make, to which his father gave an exhaustive answer. The repentant son had nothing more to say. Why the silence? He was too happy to speak. His father's manner towards him, so indulgent, forgiving, loving and sympathetic, overcame him altogether. He had counted on some kind of pardon from his father, it is true; otherwise he would not have ventured to come home at all. But he had never dreamed it would or could be so wholehearted, so warm, so spontaneous and so complete.

The Reality Outruns the Anticipation

The Prodigal had fondly hoped he might be admitted again in his father's house as the lowest

servant. Even this, he thought, would have been the height of condescension and graciousness on the part of his father, whom he had so rudely ignored, so viciously insulted, and so grossly injured. But now, when beyond his brightest possible expectations his father received him once more as his pet and favorite son; and showered upon him greater bounty and sweeter love than ever before; and manifested a joy at his return that was as great, or even greater than his own; and insisted on everyone in his household sharing this joy with him, the young man was entirely overpowered. The goodness of his father rendered him speechless with wonderment, and beside himself with gratitude and love.

Such should be the sentiments and the attitude of every true penitent after confession, in whose behalf our Lord told the appealing parable. All the love and favors of the father of the story towards his repentant son are but a dim reflection or description of the heavenly love and bounties God tenders every contrite sinner in the confessional. In view of this love and these benefits it becomes the pardoned one very well to be totally undone and, as it were, to swoon away with sheer admiration of and sincere thanksgiving for God's manner to him, and with a counter love that is in proportion to the hearty reception he has just received.

After this silent, yet most eloquent exhibition of your appreciation of the divine gift bestowed

upon you, you will say the penance imposed upon you by the priest, in case you have the time to say it. Of itself it is not necessary to say the penance immediately after confession. You are free to say it when you choose, provided you do not defer the saying of it too long, say two weeks or more. You may go to holy Communion, or even make another confession, before you say the previous penance, just so the interval is not unduly protracted. Of course, if the priest has specified when and how the penance is to be said, his specifications have to be complied with. As a rule it is wise and pleasing to God to follow the general conduct of pious Christians and say the penance after confession before leaving the church. Then there will be no danger of forgetting it.

The penance that is given in the confessional is an integral part of the sacrament. For this reason the prayers you are asked to say, or the good works you are bidden to do, assume a special value and a higher goodness in the sight of God, drenched as they are or will be, in consequence of being a part of the sacrament, with the most precious Blood of Jesus. You must aim, therefore, to say these prayers, or perform these works with particular fervor and devotion.

Do not repeat your penance through scrupulosity. This does more harm than good, and contributes nothing towards making the sacrament of penance an object of love and desire, as

it ought to be to every Christian. If you feel you have not said your penance as well as you might have said it, pass it up, while you resolve to say the next penance more devoutly. But under no consideration allow yourself to repeat this one; for once you start such a fatuous repetition you already threaten to contract the baneful habit of it. One's nerves are not to be trifled with or abused, especially not in religious matters.

Even more dangerous and unwholesome than the scrupulous repetition of one's penance after confession is the admission of groundless worry and undue excitement regarding the worthiness or unworthiness of the confession one has just made, by wondering whether one has told all the sins, in the proper manner, and with the necessary contrition, etc. Once you have done all you could in regard to your confession or, as has been explained in an earlier chapter, you have made an earnest human effort, you are to leave the rest to God and, after confession, instead of worrying meticulously whether your sins are forgiven or not, you are to rejoice confidently and thank God heartily that they are forgiven.

If soon after your confession you are conscious of having inculpably forgotten one or more mortal sins, you may either return to confess them at once, or you may hold them over until your next usual confession, receiving holy Communion as often as you desire in the meantime; for the sins are already forgiven.

A Time for Everything

Just as we please God before confession by reasonably fearing His judgments, we please Him and show our love to Him after confession by believing in, and gratefully acknowledging and glorifying, His mercy. The Wise Man in the Bible tells us that there is a time for everything, and it is wise in religion, too, to observe the respective times for each practice of devotion. The time after confession, then, is not the time to indulge a tendency to worry and perturbation, but the time for spiritual thanksgiving and jubilee. "How good is God to Israel, to them that are of a right heart!" (Ps. 72, 1.)

In the tribunal of penance the priest is in reality a judge, passing sentence in the Name and by the power of Christ. When, therefore, after you have submitted your case to him as best you could, taking in account the non-essential deficiencies that like to accompany every human effort, the priest passes on it: you can and should abide by his decision, with as much peace of heart and tranquillity of mind, as though it were given by our Lord in person.

Being human, also in his capacity as the agent and plenipotentiary of God, it is possible for the priest to err, even materially, in giving a decision in the confessional. But unless his error is manifest beyond question, the penitent can not err in complying in humble and blind acquiescence

with the decision of the confessor, whatever it may be. If scrupulous persons remembered and acted in accordance with this always, their trouble would soon disappear.

Various Tribunals

Here we may pause a moment to reflect upon the differences between the various judiciary tribunals. There are the criminal courts on this earth, the tribunal of God in judgment after death, and the tribunal of penance. The first two are courts of justice: penance is a court of mercy. Culprits are arraigned before the first two courts against their will: unto penance every guilty one accedes voluntarily. In the first two courts depositions against the defendant are made by others: in penance of his own free will he makes them against himself.

If the defendant is found guilty in the first two courts he is sentenced and punished: but no matter how guilty he reveals himself to be in the court of penance, as long as he is contrite, he is immediately absolved from all guilt and eternal punishment; and he can even cancel all his temporal punishment either by a very intense act of perfect love and contrition, or by gaining a plenary indulgence, for which the opportunity is hardly ever lacking.

In the first two courts the misdemeanors of the culprit are or will be divulged to the world, with-

out consideration or mercy: in penance the sins of the penitent are kept sacredly private, and are practically buried in everlasting oblivion, as though they had never been. Indeed, in view of this divine institution of pardon we have every reason to exclaim gratefully: "How good is God to Israel, to them that are of a right heart!" (Ps. 72, 1.)

The Daily Miracle

Every morning, as he awoke, St. Francis de Sales experienced a lively feeling of gratitude at the thought: "How good God has been to me! He has wrought another miracle in my favor. Last night I went to bed tired, worn out and run down: and now I awake refreshed, restored and reinvigorated." This so-called miracle in the physical order is nothing at all compared to the miracle God works on you in the moral and spiritual order every time you go to confession. He not only restores you to strength from weakness, to fervor from sluggishness, and to alacrity from apathy, when you have only venial faults to confess; but, as has been mentioned, He raises you from spiritual death unto spiritual life, from His enmity to His friendship, and from eternal damnation unto everlasting salvation, when through the priest He forgives you all the mortal sins you have committed. "The conversion of a sinner from wickedness to justice," says St. Chrysostom, is a

greater miracle than the raising of the dead to life." Must not this divine bounty, bestowed upon you so graciously and benignly, without anyone but God and you becoming aware of it, fill your soul with unbounded and perennial gratitude?

Gratitude at Its Best

The best exhibition of your gratitude after confession will be your virtuous conduct in keeping with your professed detestation of sin at your confession, and your reparation of all the consequences of past sins for which you are responsible. By wholesouled loyalty to God and perseverance in His love and service you give the most eloquent and convincing testimony of your appreciation of the pardon He has tendered you. It will materially serve you unto perseverance if you recall the truths regarding the efficacy of confession mentioned in a previous part of this book.

Confession is a second baptism. Your soul, now that you have just been shriven, is as dear and beauteous and holy in the sight of God as it was the moment you were baptized; in fact it is more so now, for having regained all the merits you have ever amassed, and which were possibly forfeited through mortal sin. In addition to these merits you have the merit of this latest confession: hence you are richer in grace and heavenly treasures,

and inferentially in loveliness in the sight of God, than you have ever been before in your life. The thought of this should inspire you henceforth not only to keep your record clean, but to render it brighter from day to day. As to all the sins of your past life, since God has not only forgiven but also forgotten them without exception, it behoves you to forget your individual sins, too, and not to recall, or of your own accord examine yourself regarding them again. God says solemnly: "And this is the testament which I will make unto them . . . I will give My laws in their hearts, and on their minds will I write them. *And their sins and iniquities I will remember no more*" (Hebr., 10, 16, 17). If God will no more remember them, why should you still be occupied with them?

Always Remember

In general it will be salutary and altogether in order for you to remember as long as you live that you have been a very great sinner, whom God had every reason to thrust from Him in justice and vengeance for all eternity. This thought will keep you in becoming humility and maintain in you a sense of perpetual gratitude towards God. Moreover, if you are not scrupulous, it will avail you to recall your main sins when you make a general confession, as has already been stated. But outside of this case, the sooner and more completely you forget the individual sins with all their

accessories of your past life, the better you will fare in the future.

A Wise Penitent

The greatest of all converts, St. Paul, gave us an example of this wise method of spirituality. He says: "But one thing I do: forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching forth myself to those that are before, I press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation of God in Christ Jesus" (Philip., 3, 13, 14). And if, in consideration of your past lapses and present weakness, an inordinate fear and discouragement should befall you as to your perseverance, remember the other words of the Apostle: "Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . will confirm you unto the end" (1 Cor., 1, 8, 9). "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will also make with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor., 10, 13). And say after the manner of St. Augustine, who at the time was probably much more enmeshed in evil habits and weakened through sin and vice than you are: "If others can overcome themselves and lead a holy life: why can not I?"

Marvelous Will Power

It is related of Napoleon the First that his will-power was such that, no matter what important

business of a military, political or other nature was impending, when he retired at night he at once cast all worries from his mind to resume them only after a good night's sleep the following morning. The same is recorded of the eminent Franciscan Cardinal Ximenes of Spain, great as a scholar, ecclesiastic and statesman. After confession all repentant sinners should have, and exert, the same will-power regarding the worries and anxieties of their former sins and infirmities that threaten to disturb their peace of mind and joy of soul in the practice of virtue and constancy in the Lord; with this difference withal, that they should dismiss these unwholesome thoughts definitely, never to admit them again. They must say with the Psalmist: "In peace in the selfsame I will sleep, and I will rest: for Thou, O Lord, singularly hast settled me in hope" (Ps. 4, 9, 10).

If after you have prayed your penance you have the time for it, you will do well in making the Stations or the Way of the Cross before you leave church. After holy Mass and the reception of the sacraments there is hardly any devotion so rich in beneficial effects upon the soul, and so abundantly endowed with indulgences, as this hallowed manner of meditating on the passion and death of our Lord. No time seems more seasonable and propitious for the pursuit of this beautiful and inspiring devotion than the time right after confession. First of all, it then becomes an ardent act of thanksgiving since, as has been emphasized

repeatedly, there would be no forgiveness of sin without our Lord's death on the Cross.

Secondly, this devotion will have the purpose of satisfying for the temporal punishments we may still have to suffer for our forgiven sins. With reference to this the Bible warns us, saying: "Be not without fear about sin forgiven" (Ecclus., 5, 5). The penances imposed in the confessional nowadays are slight and infinitesimal when compared to the penances inflicted for the same sins by the Church in primitive times. Yet the justice and holiness of God, that want to be entirely propitiated, are the same now they were then. The Church, therefore, enables us to make amends by granting us the opportunity of gaining very liberal indulgences, which liquidate our debt of temporal punishment rapidly and completely, provided we use them regularly and fervently. No devotion qualifies one to gain indulgences more readily and copiously than the Way of the Cross. And since, immediately after confession, the penitent is in the state of grace, there will be no hindrance as to his gaining the indulgences.

Furthermore, to go the Way of the Cross humbly and devoutly after confession is to impregnate our soul anew and deeply with a burning love for Jesus Crucified and a corresponding hatred of sin. It is a solemn object lesson, too, reminding us of our Savior's words: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt., 16, 24).

The Vanity of the Philosopher

If there is anything the true penitent ambitions after his confession it is to be a genuine cross-bearer in the wake of Christ. He wants his whole manner and deportment to bear the marks of this one ambition of his soul. They tell the story of the French deistic philosopher Diderot that in his puerile vanity and conceit, when he walked on the public street, he had a man to follow him at close range, who was to arouse the curiosity of the people respecting Diderot, ostentatiously clothed in the philosopher's mantle; and when they asked: "Who is that odd-looking man?" he was to answer: "That is the great Diderot, the philosopher."

The true Christian penitent, after his conversion to God, has no need of such an advertising medium as to his character. By his whole conduct he himself plainly declares: "With Christ I am nailed to the cross. And I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me. . . . I live in the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and delivered Himself for me. I cast not away the grace of God" (Gal., 2, 19-21).

Drawing Out the Nails

A great Dutch painter of the Middle Ages, as a young man, had run amuck in morality. Growing mature of mind and sober of heart with age, he deplored his sins bitterly. He painted his master-

piece, the Deposition of our Lord from the Cross. All the figures of it were wonderful and perfect creations. He gave his own likeness to Nicodemus, who was taking the nails out of the hands and feet of Jesus.

When asked why he chose this figure to immortalize himself, the artist replied feelingly: "God knows that in past years I have driven many a cruel nail into the hands and feet of my Savior by my hideous and countless sins. Is it not time I begin to pluck out these ugly nails before I die?" We draw out a nail from the body of Christ every time we practice virtuous self-restraint, keep the commandments, overcome temptation, and endure the afflictions that befall us. No hobby, using this word reverently in this connection, becomes us more after we have gone to confession than this manner of drawing the nails out of the sacred body of Jesus.

"See Thou Tell No Man"

All prudent penitents will be on their guard against revealing what transpired in the confessional between them and their confessor: as to the sins they confessed; the questions they asked; what the priest said to them either spontaneously or in answer to their inquiries: the more they keep the entire process of their confession to themselves the more they will consult their own personal reputation and peace of mind, as well as the good

name of the priest and, what is most important, the reverence due to the sacrament of penance.

While the penitent, as far as his sins and the admonitions of the priest addressed to him are concerned, is not bound by the solemn obligation of the seal of confession, yet prudence and good sense will restrain him from rendering public the private and sacred affairs of his soul, whose revelation will usually provide but little, if any, edification, but may provoke ridicule for the indiscreet penitent, and derision for the sacrament. Even barring this, such imprudent manifestations, especially of the confessor's replies to very personal and individual questions, may cause misconceptions of a serious nature in the minds of those who hear them. Regarding your confession you ought to be as loyal to your confessor in avoiding ill-advised disclosures as you desire him to be to you.

Indiscreet Penitents

You will have much reason to congratulate yourself if, relatively to your confession and its contents, you comply with the categorical injunction of Jesus to the leper whom He had cleansed of his disease: "See thou tell no man" (Matt., 8, 4). If certain so-called pious penitents would but know how silly and fatuous they appear to others by continually, in season and out of season, turning every conversation upon their

confessor: what they said to him; and what he said to them; and what experiences other penitents relate of their confessors, etc.: they would change tactics at once and thenceforth obey our Lord's bidding and "tell no man" of their experiences in the sacred tribunal. The matter is too holy and divine to serve as the subject of ordinary human conversation, let alone of unbecoming, irreverent and scurrilous jests.

A Sacred Secret

Whoever, because of his proximity to the confessional, or because of the loud voice of the penitent, hears the sins of one who is confessing, is bound by a most solemn obligation to keep these sins locked in his heart, even as the priest who hears them in the confessional keeps them in his. If he revealed one sin thus heard of another, or a reference of the confessor involving a sin of the penitent, he would commit a terrible mortal sin. To preclude the danger of this, it is advisable for the waiting penitents to stand at a reasonable distance from the confessional, so they can not overhear what is being said in it, and so the penitents feel perfectly safe against being heard by those standing outside the confessional.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing people have a tendency to speak in a loud and shrill voice in the confessional so they can be heard at some distance, and at times throughout the entire church. This

is very embarrassing for priest and people. In addition the priest is often in a quandary as to how he is to make these afflicted penitents understand what he wants to ask or tell them and feels they should know. All this embarrassment would be forestalled if these penitents would lay aside their exaggerated sensitiveness regarding their affliction, and would serve notice on the priest somehow and some time, that they desire to go to confession in the place appointed for more or less deaf people. They need not be ashamed to ask for this privilege, no matter how often.

The Confessions of the Deaf

The priest will be glad to accommodate the deaf whenever they make a reasonable request for it. He will prefer this method by far to the inconsiderate use of the ordinary confessional on the part of deaf people when other penitents are about, and when consequent discomfiture is inevitable for everyone concerned. And what ought to weigh most in the balance, the confessions of deaf people in the ordinary confessional are not seldom quite unsatisfactory from every point of view. The little sacrifice involved in applying to be heard in the specially arranged place should keep no deaf person from looking after his soul's interest primarily; nor, consequently, from approaching the holy tribunal frequently.

It has always been and is today a futile and absurd alibi, when deaf people try to excuse the long intervals between their confessions by a reference to their auditory defect. Its best refutation is given by many other deaf people of the same locality who habitually go to confession every week in the special place. The priest knows just when to expect them, and they are rather privileged than not, since they are frequently heard before all the other penitents; which is a laudable custom, and a just concession to their infirmity and spirit of sacrifice.

Incidentally, not only deaf people, but all penitents without discrimination should show their gratitude for the forgiveness of their sins by soon again putting in their appearance at the sacred tribunal. Nothing proves their love and appreciation of the sacrament more than their regular and frequent worthy reception of it.

A Widow and Her Ward

In conclusion, since this wonderful sacrament, which we have been considering in its various phases and admiring for its marvelous effects upon the soul, was made possible to us only through our Savior's death on the Cross, it will be a becoming tribute to our crucified Lord if we end our meditation with a little story illustrating once more the value of the sacrament of penance to us.

A very wealthy childless widow had taken into her home a splendid girl who was an orphan. The woman did not adopt her legally, but she promised that she would be a real mother to the girl, provided the girl would be a true daughter to her. Years glided on. The girl grew in loveliness and goodness, and no carnal daughter could have been more devoted to her mother than she was to her benefactress who, in her turn, reciprocated the sentiments of attachment which the girl exhibited. There was the sweetest harmony and most intimate union of hearts and minds between them.

When the lady began to discover symptoms of on-coming age and other infirmities of body and mind, her ward nursed her with unselfish attention and an unflinching spirit of sacrifice. The woman had always assured the girl that from her great wealth she would make ample provision for her so that after her death she would suffer no need whatever, but could live in ease and comfort throughout the years of her earthly sojourn. The girl thanked her warmly for this expression of goodness and liberality.

The Mysterious Crucifix

One day, while she was lying in bed suffering from her last illness, the lady turned to the girl who was seated at her bedside and, pointing to a large crucifix on the wall above the bed, she said:

“This crucifix has long been a cherished heirloom in our family. I got it from my mother, who got it from her mother, and I can not say how far back it goes in our lineage. Now I give it to you. I want you to keep it and cherish it even as I have loved it. As you notice, it is a work of art. It is very precious.” The girl promised she would take that crucifix to her heart and, because of her love and gratitude towards the donor of it, she would never part with it as long as she lived. At this the woman smiled complacently, and, as it seemed to the girl, rather mysteriously.

Not long after this incident the woman died in the arms of her faithful ward, who deplored her demise in the most sincere and touching manner. No daughter ever missed her own mother more than she felt the departure of this good woman who had been a veritable mother to her. When, some time after the funeral, the will of the lady was opened, it was disclosed that, while she had bequeathed large sums of money to various charitable and religious purposes, she only left the girl the house in which they had spent many years together, with not a cent of money in addition.

The Girl Was Disappointed

The young lady, of course, was keenly disappointed. She felt completely crushed. Hard work, need, distress and loneliness stared her in the face. She began to revolve in her mind

various plans by which she could make a living for herself. But she cried more than she planned, in consequence of the terrible disillusionment which she suffered. Being a person of faith and virtue, however, she did not allow herself to be vanquished by tribulation. She reawakened her trust in God and soon she regained calm and composure of soul, remembering "that to them that love God, all things work together unto good" (Rom., 8, 28).

She did not forget the crucifix given to her by the lady before she died. She took it unto herself and kissed it lovingly and pressed it to her sunken heart. The more her heart ached the more she sought consolation and comfort from the crucifix. Yet at times an involuntary feeling of dissatisfaction and disgust attacked her mind, intimating as much as: "Is this crucifix all she could leave me after all my care of and attention to her?" But she at once banished it with indignation and horror, and pressed the dear crucifix to her bosom tighter than ever.


The Hidden Treasure

As she did so, on one occasion, she noticed that the large crucifix had a contraption in the rear by which it could be opened. When she opened it, she found to her great astonishment that it contained not only much very valuable jewelry, but also currency bills of high denominations in so

large a number that they more than sufficed to provide her with a carefree and comfortable living unto death. Then, indeed, she blamed herself, however undeservedly, for any sinister thoughts she had ever entertained towards the precious crucifix.

When our Lord died for us on Calvary He bequeathed to us His cross. This cross of Jesus, which He invites us all to carry, is distinctly embodied in the sacrament of penance, involving as it does the greatest personal humiliation our religion bids us to perform. At times even the best of us may experience an involuntary revulsion against this crucifix, left us by our Savior, as being something small and, in a way, contemptible.

But if we, in faith and trust in our Savior, valiantly and unwaveringly combat these attacks of our vanity and pride, and seek our life's solace and comfort in this cross, we shall soon discover that it contains innumerable and priceless spiritual treasures for us in this life and for the next. Briefly, we shall become fully aware that the sacrament of penance, like Christ Crucified, Whose bequest and embodiment it is, may be "unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness: but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks," it is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor., 1, 23, 24).

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